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Weird Tales

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A romantic and intriguing tale of witchcraft

By

SEABURY QUINN

ALGERNON BLACKWOOD • ROBERT E. HOWARD

SEPTEMBER, 1938

WEIRD TALES

Vol. 32, No. 3

In Heaven a spirit doth dwell
  Whose heart-strings are a lute;
None sing so wildly well
As the angel Israfel,
And the giddy Stars (so legends tell),
Ceasing their hymns, attend the spell
  Of his voice, all mute.

—Poe: *Israfel.*

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Weird Tales

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

As 'Twas Told to Me

By SEABURY QUINN

A fascinating tale of romance and witchcraft in Puritan New England, and the fate of a lovely red-haired girl in that superstitious age

"I know not how the truth may be:
I tell the tale as 'twas told to me."
—*Bret Harte.*

Proem

TWENTY miles from Boston, only nine or ten from Salem as the highway runs, you'll find the place. Burned in the white pine plank that hangs beside the gateway is the legend: "Ye Wishing Welle," and from this purposefully quaint orthography you may be led to think it just another roadside "Tea Shoppe"—until you see the garden. There, behind a hedge of knotty-fingered pear trees, are the beds of phlox and marigold and zinnias, the sweet alyssum, columbine and love-lies-bleeding. In the rustic arbor purple Concords ripen in the sun, and where the climbing roses mask the barkless trunk of a dead tree the stone-curbed well that gives the place its name is ringed around with circle after circle of wild pansy-violets called heartsease.

The house bears out the promise of the garden. As you eat clam chowder made with milk, bacon cooked with country cream and scrod so fresh that you can almost taste the salt of sea spray on it, you look around the big low-ceilinged room and read the history of New England culture. There is a spinning-wheel, of course, and several pieces of mahogany which would be worth a fortune at the antique dealers' in New York, some Persian rugs, a Chinese lacquer highboy, blue china old and fragile as a dream, a Java print blocked in the years when Washington and Jefferson were lads. A flintlock musket hangs against the wall above the fireplace and over it a broadsword from the days of Cromwell's Ironsides. Everywhere are souvenirs of times when Yankee clippers made the Stars and Stripes an emblem known in every bay and estuary of the seven seas, when iron men in wooden ships set out on year-long voyages to bring back tea and pepper, silk, sinament and cloves; sometimes to carry powder, shot and muskets to the Arabs of the slave coast and fetch back cargoes of black ivory for the southern cotton and tobacco fields.

If you have eaten at Ye Wishing Welle enough times to acquire the status of a steady patron, and if you go out there to lunch some afternoon when tourist traffic isn't heavy, Miss Norton the proprietress may find time to exchange a little gossip with you. If she does, you'll have your education broadened. Every stick and bit of furniture and decoration in the house is tied up with the history of the Norton family, and of Massachusetts. The flintlock on the wall was carried by her father's great-grandfather when the Minute Men turned back the Redcoats at Breed's Hill; the broadsword flashed at Naseby when Ironton's regiment broke Prince Rupert's charge; that bit of Java print was brought home by her great-aunt's husband, Joseph Eaton, whose whaling-vessel had been blown out

of its course—perhaps, even, she'll tell you of the days when the old wishing-well was newly dug, of Mary Popham and her phantom lover, and the shadow which eclipsed the Colony of Massachusetts Bay when the Powers of Darkness spread their spike-set wings across the sun.

"Mary Popham," says Miss Norton, "was a very pretty girl, and"—her little, thin-lipped mouth will prim down at the corners as she hesitates, for this is an accolade not lightly to be laid on any woman's shoulder by one whose family tree's roots strike deeply in New England's soil—"and, I think, a very good one. . . ."

1

THE April sun was up four hours as Mary Popham walked along the Salem Road toward Goody Upsall's cottage. Spring had come early to the colony, and along the creekside willow branches were already showing little tips

"As he toppled backward a horrifying sentence echoed in his inward ear: 'You have shed the blood of innocence, and God will repay you with blood!'"

of green, while in the roadside woods, still bare, but making promise of an early leafage, a robin and his wife were flying all a-twitter as they searched for straws and twigs to build their nest. Judged by any standards Mary Popham was a very pretty girl. She was of medium height with fair, smooth skin, red hair that seemed to have been spun from gold alloyed with copper, gray eyes that in some lights looked green, and small, clear features. Even in her homespun gown of slate-gray linsey-woolsey and her loose leaf-brown cloak of woolen stuff the beauty of her figure was apparent, and the linen cap that hugged her head as tightly as the cupule of an acorn clasps the nut, could not obscure the fact that her bright hair was crinkled into little glistening curls which needed only momentary freedom to run rippling down her back and shoulders in a flashing knee-length cataract. On Sabbath Day when she sat in the meeting-house to hear the Reverend Butler thunder forth the warning of Jehovah's awful wrath or read homilies to heaven disguised (but not too heavily) as prayers, it was to the small Titian curls that clustered at her neck and ears that the young men's eyes went straying, and more times than one the tithingman's stout stick had come down on the luckless yokels' polls to bring their wandering attention back to the pleasant prospect of assured damnation and the dreadful pains of everlasting torment rather than the contemplation of Mistress Mary's aureate ringlets. She had a way of walking with her small chin tilted up which more than once had brought her admonition from the elders of the congregation, and when she stepped it was with swinging, lovely grace.

A hanaper of plaited willow filled with new-baked bread wrapped in a linen napkin swung in her left hand; in the crook of her right arm she bore a crock of milk chilled in the well since yestereve, for Goody Upsall was afflicted with the rheumatism, infirm, half blind and nearly toothless, and the meager living she eked out by gathering simples and compounding nostrums was scarce enough to keep her crumbling roof above her head. The leavened bread and rich, sweet milk would be as great a boon to her as quail and manna had been to the wandering Hebrew children in the wilderness.

"Good morrow! 'Morrow, pretty maid!" Goody Upsall bobbed a creaking curtsy as Mary thrust the gate back with her foot and crossed the little patch of herb-garden that stretched before the door. "There's a good Christian maid, come to bring a poor old woman food. Ay, ay, my pretty one, heaven will requite ye for your charity, never fear. Sit down, dearie"—she motioned to the bench beside the door—"sit down and visit with old Mother Upsall. It's famished that I am for human company these days, for everyone has turned against me, and the ones who used to come to me for herbs and simples come no more; the goodwife walks across the way from me; the boys fling stones whenever I come into view." Her wrinkle-withered lips began to twitch and her bristle-studded chin to tremble as she wiped her rheumy eyes upon her cuff. "Alas, alack, woe me!" she sniveled.

MARY put the bread and milk down on the doorside bancal and looked at the old woman with compassion. The slow, scant tears of age seemed somehow much more pitiful than the easy freshets of young grief. "Why do they treat you thus despitefully?" she asked.

The beldame sniffed and drew her sleeve across her face again. "They say I get my cunning from the Evil One, and it's a wicked lie! When Goodman Kempthorn lay sick o' the quaking fever,

who was it cured him when the doctors and the leeches—ay, and Deacon Prowder and the Reverend Butler with their prayin', too!—had failed and gave him up for lost? 'Twas I, old Goody Upsall, did it with my cinquefoil, my saxifrage and pennyroyal. And did they pay me for't? Nay, not they! ' 'Tis Satan's handiwork, not simple herbs, that done it,' quoth the leeches, and, 'Like as not she laid the sickness on him by her wicked arts, then did but seem to cure with herbs when she took off the spell!' the deacon said, and so they bade me go my ways without a penny's pay or even a civil word o' thanks, and count myself as lucky that they did not speak against me for a witch."

"But that was wicked!" Mary flushed with indignation. "Even if you did use Satan's help—and that I don't believe—the work you did was good. You cured him of his ailment, and they'd promised you a guerdon. 'Twas dishonest to entreat you so!"

The old crone's head wagged back and forth as if it had been set upon a rocker. "Ay, ay, dearie, you say truth," she answered in a piping treble, "but there's none as will take up for poor old Mother Upsall nowadays. Deacon Prowder do be wanting I should sell him my poor house and garden plot for forty shillings, and——"

"Sell your home for forty shillings? But that would scarce buy bread a twelvemonth, and where would you be sheltered with no roof above your head?"

"Why, in the poorhouse, dearie."

"But we have no poorhouse in the parish——"

"Ay, but we have. God's resting-place for all His weary creatures. Have ye not seen it in the shadow o' the meeting-house?"

Mary's gray-green eyes seemed almost emerald as they opened wide in sudden horror. "That shall not be! 'Twould be a scandal and disgrace to all the neighborhood—ah, the pretty things!" Her indignation broke upon an exclamation of delight as Bessie, Goody Upsall's brindle tabby, stalked soft-footed from the house followed by four wobbly-legged progeny. She scooped the foremost kitten up and held it in her hands, where, after giving her a moment's wide-eyed stare of feline appraisal, it curled itself into a furry ball, dropped lids across its almost sky-blue eyes, and straightway purred itself to sleep. Meanwhile Bessie circled Mary's ankles, rubbed ears and whiskers on the rough wool of her stockings, and having decided she was one who could be trusted, dropped down on the border of her russet woolen cape, turned on her side and proceeded to give nourishment to the three remaining kittens.

A look that was almost akin to tenderness came upon old Goody Upsall's age- and trouble-hardened features as she gazed upon the young girl with the kitten in her lap. Wouldst like to have it for thine own?" she asked. "It is a pretty thing, and seems to love the touch of your soft hands."

Mary raised the small gray furry ball and held it to her face, where it rested quietly a moment, then with a plaintive little mew thrust out a quarter-inch of coral tongue and licked her lightly on the tiny nevus-mole that rested like a natural beauty patch just where the line of her small pointed chin sloped from her cheek. "Oh, I should love to have him—see, he seems to love me better than his mother, already——"

A cough, half forced, half reflex, interrupted her as the lengthened shadow of a man fell on the doorstep. "Good morrow, Mistress Popham, morrow, Goodwife Upsall," greeted Deacon Simon Prowder.

Mary neither moved nor spoke, but her

eyes appeared more green than ever as she surveyed the deacon and his hired man, John Wharton, with the sort of look she might have bestowed on a pair of slugs found lurking in her currant bushes.

Goody Upsall was upon her splay-boned feet, bowing and bobbing with obsequious hospitality. "Good morrow, Deacon, good morrow, Goodman Wharton, prithee come and set here i' the sun," she brushed the doorside settle with the hem of her dress. " 'Tis over-warm for such an early day in April, is it not? I do not think that ever I have seen the sun so bright and warm."

With a motion of his brogan Deacon Prowder swept the nursing cat and kittens from his way and dropped down on the bancal beside Mary.

"Have you thought well on that of which I spake to you last Sabbath, Mistress Popham?" he demanded softly. " 'Twould be an enviable thing for you, for even if I be not young I am a man of substance, having lands and goods, and right much worship in the congregation—nay, put the little cat-thing by and hear me——" he stretched a hand out to remove the kitten from her lap and she turned a shoulder to him, hugging the small beast against her gown.

"I do not wish to put the cat away," she answered. "He loves me and I love him. We are content with each other. Why should I exchange? He will not have me spin and weave and sew and bake, or bear him children, or look after those my predecessors bore——"

"Silence, girl!" Amazed and shocked, the deacon rose and towered over her. "This talk is unbecoming to a Christian maid. Get you to your house and think upon the duty which you owe to God and to His ministers. I would talk privately with Goodwife Upsall."

The cold fury in the outraged Bessie's eyes was neither colder nor more furious than that which blazed in Mary Popham's green-eyed stare as she arose and faced him. "If I go it is because I find my own—and my cat's—company better to my liking than I can find yours, and not because you bid me leave!" She dropped the vestige of a curtsy. "Your servant, sir! Good morrow, Goody Upsall, Goodman Wharton." She drew her cloak around her and, straight-shouldered as a soldier on parade, walked through the little dooryard and up the dusty Salem Road.

2

MARY POPHAM lived alone. Her cottage was well-built and roofed with cedar shingles, with a wide stone chimney and a cellar under all, a garden plot where cabbages and pumpkins, melons, corn and turnips grew abundantly, and before it a small space where columbine and marigold, harebells, phlox and love-lies-bleeding showed bright colors. Almost at her back door the great Atlantic rolled, now placid as a playful house-cat, now turbulent as a devouring lion, but always with a note of friendship in its voice, even when it raged most wildly. Between the ocean and the house her father had delved for a spring, and struck it less than twelve feet down. Then he had walled the well with fieldstone and curbed it with a waist-high parapet and set the sweep above it, and round the curb her mother—Irish-born, but Protestant for love of Daniel Popham who had come with Cromwell to despoil and lost his heart to Kathleen Nolan—had set a circling bed of wild pansy-violets called heartsease.

Mary's early training had been different from the training other village children had. She learned the Scriptures, as was seemly for a Christian child, but in-

stead of having fear of God drilled in her she was taught to think of Him as an all-understanding, loving father, and in the evening when the rushlights burned, the verses which were read from the great book were oftener of Jesus and the works of pitying-kindness that He wrought than of the all-consuming wrath and vengeance of the Lord Jehovah. Sometimes, too, her mother told them stories of the Little People who lived in the hollow mountain and came out upon the earth to dance and sing and play the pipes and fiddle in the moonlight, or of the prankish leprechauns who would pay you a king's ransom if you caught them unawares. Sometimes—very softly, lest the godly neighbors hear—she sang them olden Irish songs, tunes with the tang of peat-smoke and the salt of tears in them, or quick-paced, lilting ditties which went as quickly to the feet as the whisky of her homeland mounted to the head.

Mary even had a poppet, a thing of rags with crudely painted face and worsted hair gathered in a linen cap which was a miniature of Mary's own, and a gray, full-skirted gown of linsey-woolsey. A crude, unlovely thing it was, but the darling of her infant heart, and more than once its features had to be renewed when Mary's fervent, oft-repeated kisses wore them dim. She had heard her mother tell of dolls the little girls played with in Ireland, and set her heart on having one, but in all the shops of Massachusetts Bay there was no doll, nor anyone who had the hardihood to offer one for sale. Life was brief and real and very earnest, and the God of Vengeance and of Battles would not hold him guiltless who dared fritter it away with vanities. Christmas was a Popish feast day, not to be observed in any way on pain of strictest discipline, but on Christmas Eve her mother took her to the snow-capped well-curb and bade her toss a penny in the almost frozen water glinting in the moonlight.

"Arrah, asthore, 'tis a wishin'-well the night," she declared. "Toss in your penny, turn about and make a wish, and whatever 'tis ye wish for—if so be 'tis nothing wicked—will surely come to pass."

Mary dropped the coin into the well and watched the curling ripples widen till they washed against the stones in little waves, then pivoted three times and cried out in a childish treble: "I wish I had a poppet for my own, to love me and to sleep in bed with me!"

"Whist, child, would ye have the tithing-man—bad cess to him an' all his kind!—come down on us, that ye do be spakin' out so loud?" her mother asked, then gathered Mary in her arms and rocked her to and fro. "Oh, mavourneen, 'tis a cold, cruel sky we're livin' under, and colder, crueler men we're livin' 'midst!" She clasped the small girl closer to her bosom, and: "It's a heavy price I'm payin' for the love I bear ye, Daniel Popham," she whispered toward the house where Mary's father waited, "but" —her clasp was suddenly hysterically tight—"Mary Mother witness that I pay it willin'."

Next morning Mary found the poppet gazing at her from the top of a long stocking hanging by the fireplace, and there was goose with herbs and roasted roots to eat at noontime. For the first time Mary was beset by heresy. If celebrating Jesus' birthday was so pleasant, why should it be a wicked thing to do, and if the Papists worshipped Him and kept his day so joyfully, were they truly wicked and irrevocably damned for all eternity—even little Papist girls, whose mothers doubtless gave them poppets, too?

At school she found a barrier between her and her horn-bookmates. Children

hate and persecute the nonconformist as bitterly as do their elders, and Mary was the only red-haired pupil in the class. But she did not suffer insult meekly, and when her fists and nails and teeth, no less than acid wit, left battle-scars upon her persecutors the school-ma'am cast the final vote, with Mary always in the wrong. For sauciness she had to wear a cleft twig on her tongue, the rattan was her daily portion, her schoolroom crown the dunce-cap.

One day a little band of friendly Indians walked down the village street, just as the pupils issued forth. Of the round-eyed stares and half-jeering, half-affrighted words the children cast at them they took no notice, but of Mary they took instant and respectful observation. One by one they went to her and laid their hands upon her glowing hair. Awed and frightened, the youngsters watched in silence, for these were savages whose fathers had swept down like a plague on the colonists, and the Indian scalping-knife was still a menace in the border settlements. But when the leader of the party pointed to the small girl's fiery thatch and announced gutturally, "She Great Spirit's friend, she child of Sun God!" their fear was turned to shouts of wild derision. Still, a certain fear ran through the malice of the taunts they flung at her . . . what sort of white child was it who was singled out as one apart by wild men of the woods?

Her name, too, was against her. In Boston, Salem, and the larger towns were many girls named Mary, but in all the settlement of Fairtown she was the only one so called. In her class were Prudence, Charity and Helpful, even Bide-the-Coming-of-the-Lord-with-Patience and Plentiful-in-All-Good-Works. But Mary! Mary was a *saint*. The Papists set her near—some even said upon—the very throne of God. To be called after her was little better than to be a follower of prelacy oneself.

So Mary trod a lonely path through childhood, finding comfort in her parents and amusement in the little games she made up for herself.

When the plague swept through the colony and her mother was among the stricken, a wailing as of all the northern winds together sounded at the window in the dead of night. "Danny, darlin', Mary, asthore, 'tis the banshee keenin' for me," whispered the sick woman. "I'll not be seein' the sunrise tomorrow, and I'm askin' that ye'll take Itself out of the box behint the door and bring it to me. I'm a weak and sinful woman, so I am, and I'd make me peace with heaven, if so be I can. . . ."

"Nay, belovèd, 'tis the wailing of the wind, perhaps a wolf made bold by hunger creeping near the settlement," her husband comforted, but the wailing grew and swelled until it seemed a woman screamed in labor at the very window-sill, and when Mary went to fetch her mother's little leather treasure chest from its place beside the built-in oven she paused and put her eye against the loophole in the puncheon shutter.

With mouth pressed close against the bottle-glass that glazed the window leant a woman, fair of hair and white of face, violet-eyed and ruddy-lipped. Her mouth was opened wide, showing the hard line of white teeth gleaming pearl-pale in the night, and from her lips there came a steady-mounting cry, first low-moaning like a cat that seeks his leman in the night, then rising like the wind that sweeps the capes when the ocean is in torment, rising . . . rising to a howl, and lifting from a howl to a thin shriek, then sinking gradually again until it was no louder than the whimper of a child that dreams a fearsome dream.

The woman seemed in grief unbearable, and yet . . . was it a woman standing at the window? The floor was two feet higher than the ground outside, and Mary stood upon the oven step to peer out through the loophole; yet the face looked at her eye to eye, the shadowy fair hair blew and floated round the pale thin cheeks—and under it there was no neck.

Mary started back affrighted, then took courage. There was no menace—only sorrow—in the cry the phantom woman raised, and the violet-irised eyes that looked at her were sad, yet somehow comforting. "It is the wind that moans around the ingle," she said softly as she bent and took the leather casket from its hiding-place.

Inside the box were Kathleen Popham's few mementoes of her home across the sea, a sprig of hawthorn, dried and withered, a packet of the letters Daniel wrote her in their courtship days, a wisp of hair clipped from her mother's head as she lay in her winding-sheet; finally, beneath them all for greater secrecy, a crucifix no longer than her little finger, so tiny that the ivory body fixed with nails against the blackwood rood was shorter than a darning-needle, and hardly more in girth.

The dying woman pressed the little cross against her lips and murmured a brief prayer: *"Sancta Maria, mater Dei. ora pro nobis peccatoribus, nunc et in hora mortis nostræ. . . ."* Finally: "Danny, darlin', stand furninst me, with the candlelight upon you, so your face will be the last thing that——" Kathleen Popham's soul went out upon the sigh that broke her farewell to the man for whom she forsook kin and faith and country.

When they buried Kathleen in a grave beside the meeting-house only Mary and her father knew that underneath the woolen winding-sheet a crucifix was clasped in the pale hands that crossed the quiet bosom.

Daniel Popham outlived Kathleen by a scant two years, and when they had consigned him to his grave Mary found herself the heiress to his house and land, two cows, numerous ducks and chickens and two hundred golden sovereigns minted with the symbol of King James' majesty. She lacked for nothing, for her skill at linen-spinning made her handiwork a merchantable quality, and her fowls and cows were also money-makers. Serenely, self-contained, she lived and worked and worshipped at the meeting-house, and when suitors cast sheep's-eyes at her she met their overtures with gentle railtery or, sometimes, acid-sharp refusal. One trial was enough, and village lads went off to find some more complaisant maids, leaving her in peace.

All but Simon Prowder, farmer, merchant, deacon in the church and four times widower. When Mary refused him he pursed his lips as was his wont when he encountered obduracy in a horse or land trade, bowed, and went his ways, but not for long. Again and yet again he offered her his heart and hand, the overseership of his big house and guardianship of his ten children, one or two of whom were Mary's seniors. Last Sabbath Day he had informed her he must have her final answer in a sennight, and hinted that the answer must be favorable, else the consequences would be most unpleasant for her.

As Mary walked along the Salem Road that April morning she was more than ever strengthened in her resolution to have none of him. Instinctively she shrank from hurting others, but if Simon Prowder could not understand unless she lashed him with the sharp edge of her tongue, then lashed he would be, and so thoroughly that the memory of it would endure as long as he remembered any-

thing. Try to force old Goody Upsall to give him her house for forty shillings, would he? Kick an inoffensive cat and kittens from his path, would he? Tell her that he was a man of substance and respect, would he? Well, she had substance of her own, and the respect, if not the liking, of her neighbors. She needed none of him, and none of him she'd have. Some day, perhaps, a man whom she could love and honor and obey right willingly would come into her life; if so she'd gladly give her maiden heart to him; if not, then let her live alone, a maid unto her dying day.

3

SIMON PROWDER had not boasted idly when he called himself a man of worship. He had a pew well forward in the meeting-house, a cow-right on the common, and held a sergeancy in the militia. He had six well-worked farms besides some tracts of forest land, a pier and warehouse in the harbor; scarce a ship put out from Salem or Fairtown that he did not have a sharehold in her cargo. Had he lived today he would have been called a go-getter. Certainly, whenever he saw what he wanted he did not hesitate to go for it, and generally he got it. To those opposing him he showed no mercy; for those who were compliant he had nothing but contempt.

The land adjoining Goody Upsall's place had come to him at public cry when its owner had been banished from the colony for adherence to the Baptist heresy. With her small garden plot and cottage added to it he could split it into two plantations, each with a cottage for the tenant farmer. But he was not minded to pay overmuch for it. When he approached her with an offer she was stubborn with the stubbornness of age, refusing to consider any price for what her goodman left her at his death. "The Lord forbid that I should give my heritage to you," she told him.

But what he could not have by direct assault Simon Prowder took by indirection. Accordingly, that morning after he had driven Mary off he made the aged goodwife a fine offer, twenty pine-tree shillings paid in hand at once for her property when she was dead. Meanwhile, the land was hers to occupy throughout her life. Goody Upsall had been widowed twenty years and had neither blood kin nor affinitive relations; hence her land would escheat to the colony upon her death. In the course of nature she could not live long, and if he bought reversion rights, he would not long be denied possession, while if the land reverted to the commonweath he would have to pay far more than twenty shillings to purchase it at public cry.

Now, with his deed signed, sealed and delivered, he strode home through the April dusk. Supper waited him, and family prayers and Scripture reading, then bed and pleasant dreams. Neither God nor man nor conscience could accuse him. He had not driven Goody Upsall from her land, he had but bought reversion of her freehold. He had not devoured the widow's house, his hands were clean.

Evening prayer was long drawn out at Deacon Prowder's, for there were many matters needing heaven's attention, and these must needs be pointed out with great particularity. But finally the prayer was over, and he turned the covers of his Bible back. It was his wont to let the book fall open as it would, for always Holy Writ had guidance for the devout, and the Lord would point the passage for his reading. The pages opened at the twenty-first chapter of the first Book of Kings. Deacon Prowder set his spectacles before his eyes and read aloud:

"And Ahab spake unto Naboth, saying, 'Give me thy vineyard that I may have it for a garden of herbs, because it is near unto my house, and I will give thee for it a better vineyard than it, or if it seem good to thee, I will give thee the worth of it in money.'

"And Naboth said to Ahab, "The Lord forbid it me, that I should give the inheritance of my fathers unto thee.'

"And Ahab came into his house heavy and displeased because of the word which Naboth had spoken to him, and he laid him down upon his bed and turned away his face and would eat no bread.

"But Jezebel his wife came to him and said, 'Why is thy spirit sad, and why eatest thou no bread?'

"And he said unto her, 'Because I spake with Naboth the Jezreelite, and said unto him, "Give me thy vineyard," and he answered, "I will not give thee my vineyard."'

"And Jezebel his wife said unto him, 'Arise and eat bread and let thy heart be merry, for I will give thee the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite.'

"So she wrote letters in Ahab's name and sealed them with his seal, and sent the letters unto the elders and to the nobles that were in his city, dwelling with Naboth. And she wrote in the letter, saying, 'Proclaim a fast and set Naboth on high among the people.

"'And set two men, sons of Belial, before him to bear witness against him saying, "Thou didst blaspheme God and the king." And then carry him out and stone him that he may die.'

"And the men of his city, even the elders and the nobles who were the inhabitants in his city, did as Jezebel had sent unto them, and as it was written in the letters which she had sent unto them."

4

MARY plunged her bucket in the wishing-well, then leant against the long sweep's butt to bring the dripping cask up. She had labored late that evening, for the cows had gone astray and when she brought them in their bags were full to dripping. Now the two five-gallon crocks were sunk to chill in the well's depths, the cows were haltered in their shed, the chickens fed, only fresh water in the kitchen ewer, and work was over for the day. Lazy fogs of leaf-smoke drifted slowly over the flat lands; all round her was the scent of spring burgeoning. Out of the Atlantic came the moon, scorched silver with a charcoal smear of cloud across its face. She inhaled deeply as she poured the water from bucket to pitcher, and a psalm verse came unbidden to her lips. "O Lord, how manifold are Thy works . . ."

The clatter of shod hoofs upon the highway, a woman's voice in piping, querulous protest, then a little trail of dust which settled in the roadway as the cavalcade swept by.

"What is't?" Mary halted at her gateway and hailed a group of half-grown lads who trailed the horsemen, eyes alight with gleeful expectation.

"They've spoken Goody Upsall for a witch!" one of the urchins called across his shoulder. " 'Twas Master Tittingwell, the marshal, and his posse, just rode by. They're taking her to Fairtown jail!"

5

THE crowd was packed so densely in the Fairtown meeting-house, the little building seemed like a kettle overfilled, then set a-boiling. Inside, the social strata of theocracy were carefully observed, deacons taking precedence of laymen, clerkly squire, substantial merchant and landed husbandman before the artizan and clown and jerry-workman. Outside at the stoep and on the village green the boiled-up dregs of the community had settled, yokels from the fields, improvident hangers-on from dock and waterfront and tavern, gangling, pimple-speckled hobbledehoys. A long oak table had been set upon the rostrum, and at it sat the magistrates with the Reverend Doctor Simeon Hollinshed, come all the way from Boston town to give the judges ghostly counsel. Master Tittingwell the marshal with his long sword girt upon him was in attendance on their worships, while the tithing-man and two members of the trained band armed with halberds stood as bailiffs to enforce the orders of the court.

"Bring in the prisoner," ordered Mr. Justice Proctor, and a long-drawn susurration followed as necks were craned and feet were scraped while the audience strained to glimpse old Goody Upsall herded down the aisle by two constables. Without the cane which had helped her faltering walk for more than ten years, bent with rheumatism till it seemed she had been born a hunchback, the old dame scarce could shuffle; if the constables had not supported her she could not have walked at all, for heavy fetters burdened down her withered arms, and iron gyves that weighed at least a stone were clamped about her ankles. And to the shackles of infirmity and metal, terror added crushing weight. It took no second glance to see that awful fear had gripped her by the throat and laid its icy hold upon her stomach till she was fairly palsied by it.

The clerk read the indictment, long, redundant, setting forth in complicated law-words her accusations of the heinous crime of witchcraft: ". . . that on divers days she wickedly and wilfully, not having fear of God before her eyes, but being led thereto by Satan, did overlook the cows of Japheth Brown, to wit, one brindle and one black female animal of *genus bos,* making them, the said cows, fail and refuse to give down milk . . . did wickedly and covetously bewitch the churn of Goodwife Gloyd, so that the butter would not come, maugre the industrious efforts of Goodwife Gloyd aforesaid . . . did keep and harbor a familiar spirit in the shape of a grimalkin, which imp, familiar or devilkin assisted her in working grievous wrongs, against the form of the statute in such case made and provided and against the peace and dignity of our lord the king."

With wagging head and fumbling hands the old dame heard the long indictment read, but when the clerk demanded how she pleaded her only answer was, "Let me pray! O, your worships, give me leave to pray!" The tears coursed down her wrinkled cheeks, and she would have clasped her gnarled old hands in supplication, but the constables on either side grasped her elbows in so tight a grip that she could not join them.

"We have not sent for you to hear you pray, but to determine your degree of guilt of the crimes which have been charged against you," answered Mr. Justice Proctor. "How do you plead to the indictment, guilty or not guilty?"

"Your worships, gentlemen, have mercy on a poor old woman! 'Fore God, I am no witch, nor did I ever hurt these people. I never did a mite o' harm to anyone. You know me, neighbors"—she swept her rheumy, presbyopic eyes across the double row of pews which held the twelve men who would bring a verdict in —"you, Goodman Hathorn, know I cured your daughter of the bloody flux, and you, Absalom Whitney, can testify I rid you of the scurvy. How did I so? By witchcraft, quotha? Nay, 'twas by the use of God's wild plants, the merits of which I learnt at my mother's knee——"

"Silence!" Mr. Justice Proctor interrupted. "How darest thou vaunt thy wicked cunning here in this appointed place of worship? How plead you to the accusation, guilty or not guilty?"

"Why, then, not guilty, if it please your worships."

So, issue being joined in lawful manner, Sarah Upsall stood upon her trial.

Witnesses were sworn. Japheth Brown, a tenant farmer on one of Deacon Prowder's plantations, told how his kine went dry the evening after Goody Upsall paused to pass the time of day across the wall that fenced his pasture. Butter would not come, despite her earnest labor, the afternoon that Goody Upsall stopped to beg a pottle of corn meal, swore

Goodwife Make-Ye-Ready-for-the-Bridegroom's-Coming Gloyd, wife of another tenant upon Deacon Prowder's land.

In those days nowhere in the world was one accused of felony permitted counsel, but English law required the judge to guard the prisoner's rights. Thus Mr. Justice Proctor carried out his sworn duty when he thundered: "I am content! Gentlemen of the jury, find ye not the prisoner guilty of the crimes alleged against her?"

Twelve heads were nodded in agreement, twelve voices chorused, "That we do."

"So say all of you?" the clerk intoned.

"So say we all of us," the answer came.

"Hast anything to say before the sentence of the law is passed?" asked Mr. Justice Proctor.

The poor old woman looked around as if she sought some avenue of physical escape. Finally, her roving, frightened gaze stopped at Simon Prowder, sitting in his Sabbath pew.

"Good neighbor Prowder," she besought, "will you not raise your voice in my behalf? You know full well I am no witch, but a poor old widow, friendless and afflicted with infirmities of age. But two weeks gone you called and paid me twenty silver shillings for my——"

"I did not know it, then!" Prowder's shout drowned out her quavering plea. "I thought you innocent, or never, as I love my soul's salvation, would I have set a foot within your gate. On the sworn word of these worthy folk and by the findings of the jurors, you're a wicked witch, a child of Satan and a burning brand in hell's consuming fire. Look not to me for testimony, sorceress!"

6

The sun shone bright on Fairtown Common, and at the edges of the green there showed a glint of pinkish white where pale arbutus blossoms broke their leafy prisons. The apple blows and plum buds swelled with promise of rich fruitage, birds sang and chirped in trees that showed a fringe of green against the somber brown of bark. But not in one tree. Neither tender leaf nor bulging bud nor twittering bird was on its gaunt, bare branch, but the two-ell length of rope tipped with a running-noose proclaimed the fruit it soon would bear.

The magistrates were grouped beneath the gallows tree, and with them Reverend Doctor Simeon Hollinshed, come all the way from Boston town to give them ghostly counsel. Against them, garbed in sober Sabbath best, the Reverend Butler stood surrounded by his deacons, grave of mien, but somewhat elated, too, for they were about to be admitted to the roll of those who proved their faith by works. Salem, less than ten miles distant, had already turned off half a dozen witches; thus far Fairtown had not hanged a single one.

A loud and formal crying at the common's border: "Make way; make way, there!" Then a roll of drums and the tramp of marching feet as the trained band's halberdiers and constables escorted Goody Upsall on her last brief walk.

No minister accompanied her, no voice read Scriptural consolation or recited valedictory prayers, for yesternight the Reverend Butler and his deacons had visited her in jail and read the awful doom of excommunication to her as she cowered in her cell. Debarred from heaven, hopelessly consigned to hell, she needed but the little walk, the little drop, the strangling tightening of the hangman's noose, to have her soul pass everlastingly to Satan's fiery furnaces where, for little time or longer, as it pleased God in His mercy to ordain, it should burn and smolder in hot torment till the Resurrection Day when, once again en-

closed in flesh, the fire that dieth not should burn, but not consume, the body, soul and spirit for eternity.

A five-runged ladder led up to the dray that stood beneath the gibbet, but the lame old woman was so weak with fear and fasting that she could not mount the steps.

"Will no one pray for poor old Mother Upsall?" she besought, and her voice was like the thin squeak of a mouse caught by the cat.

"Nay, Goody, be of cheer, 'tis but a little step across the line from torment into life eternal, and there those who have gone before await thee. Fear not; God knows you're innocent of any wrong!" Mary Popham thrust herself between the constables who held the aged woman, and bent and kissed the withered, tear-stained cheek.

A hand fell heavily upon her shoulder and she was dragged back. Simon Prowder glared into her eyes, brows drawn down, lips curled back until it seemed he snarled like a brute beast. "Art possessed, wench?" he asked. "How dare you flout the justice of the Lord?"

Old Goody had been lifted to the cart, the noose was slipped about her scrawny throat, the hangman's helper struck the cart-horse on the rump, the cart moved off, and Goody Upsall's chain-bound feet danced on the empty air.

A double-roll of drums served as her passing-bell. It did not take her long to die. Half dead with fright already, her wildly-beating heart most likely broke like shattering glass before she felt the hempen collar tighten round her wizened neck.

The air was tense, electrified. A silence like the silence of the interstellar spaces lay upon the crowd assembled on the common. Even nesting birds forbore to chirp as Sarah Upsall's spirit winged its flight.

Then Mary Popham's voice rang bell-clear through the silence. "'Twas you who did this, Simon Prowder. They were your suborned hirelings who swore her life away. You have shed the blood of innocence, and God will give you blood to drink!"

7

The rumbling echo of a signal shot rolled across the plowed and wooded flatlands, brought up against the hills and came grumbling back like summer thunder. A ship, the *Johan Plomaert* out of Haarlem, had put into Fairtown harbor for refitting and repair. Sailing for the Carolinas with a company of Huguenots she had been battered almost to a wreck by storms and blown far from her course. It would take at least two weeks to fit her for her long trip down the coast; meantime much profit would accrue to Fairtown chandlers, and French passengers and Dutch crew might have a chance to stretch their legs ashore and see and be seen by the citizens.

Everyone who could went to the waterfront to see the foreigners, and the baggy knickerbockers and short jackets with bright silver buttons of the Dutchmen were a cause of interested admiration on the part of Fairtown girls, while the Hollanders' prodigious thirsts and willingness to treat were equally acceptable to taverners and townsmen. Most of the Dutchmen spoke some English, many Fairtown men had been to sea and picked up smatterings of Dutch; so fraternity was thick and bibulous until some roistering seamen chose to sing a rousing lied beneath the marshal's window late at night. Next day four of them had an hour in the stocks in which to meditate upon the evils of ebriety; three others were assessed ten shillings each, and one stood lock-necked in the pillory. From that time on the

cause of temperance gained increased devotion.

The Frenchmen were of different stripe. Small, for the most part, dark, frugal with their money and unable to communicate except in Dutch so broken that it might as well have been their native tongue, they were objects of suspicion rather than of welcome. Protestants they might be, but they were also French, and Frenchmen were traditionally suspect in New England. Also they were sensitive, and gave back baleful glare for glare as they walked through the town. When some young oafs mocked their alien talk, imitating it with jabbering gibberish, then progressed to jostling from oral insult, the Huguenots turned on them and for a sorrowful five minutes the young roughs knew the fierce wrath that had made the walls of La Rochelle impregnable to Richelieu's soldiers for a year of bitter siege. Then the Frenchmen walked back to their boats, not swaggering, but decidedly not meek of mien, and Marshal Tittingwell was waiting at the waterfront with a posse of three constables to place them in restraint for assault and battery.

Master Tittingwell and his posse swam to shore, their ardor dampened and their dignity irreparably damaged, and the Frenchmen rowed out to the *Johan Plomaert*, where next day their leader openly defied the bearers of a warrant of arrest, maintaining that his followers were guilty of no crime, but acted only in their own defense. He also promised to run through the first man who set foot upon the deck to molest his company, and as he had two score of naked swords behind him, the marshal wisely forbore to assert authority. But a proclamation was published the next day, making it a misdemeanor for any passenger of the *Johan Plomaert* to set foot in Fairtown or any of the lands appurtenant thereto.

MARY had not joined the curious crowds who went to see the outlanders, nor was she greatly interested in gossip of their looks and dress and manners. Her little farmstead and the work of spinning flax kept her fully occupied, and she had small ear for tattle. But when she heard about the Frenchmen's tussle with the marshal and his aides she rejoiced at their spirit and at their leader's declaration of defiance.

Two evenings following the interdiction of the Huguenots she was coming home from taking thirty skeins of thread to Goodwife Fowler when she met the lawbreaker. Shadows were falling rapidly, for it was late. The April twilight lay in pellucid cumulus upon the landscape, and kindling village lights flashed through the purple dusk in echo of the stars that kindled in the overhanging sky. To her left the ocean chuckled on its rocky beach as if it knew a jest too good to share; beyond the rolling country at her right the hills stood with their shoulders to the night, holding back like dikes the flood of savagery and malice of the Indians, dispossessed and powerless for the nonce, but with their smoldering dreams of vengeance kept afire by memory of ancient wrongs.

She had almost reached the pollard willow where tradition said the earthbound spirit of a suicide was wont to walk o' nights—the spirit of a Royalist who fled the Lord Protector's wrath and killed himself to thwart the purpose of the colonists to send him back in chains to England. She knew the story of the specter from her girlhood, how it strutted in its feathered hat and laces, swaggering its sword and shaking out its ghostly lovelocks in the moonlight, and her girlish heart had beat until her breath came short when they told how the shade sometimes stopped the passerby, challenging the male wayfarer to a

duel, refusing to allow its women victims to proceed unless they danced a measure with it or permitted it to kiss them.

A shadow deeper than the shade the topless willow cast moved by the roadside as she quickened pace, and she felt the ripple of small chills run up her back and itch across her scalp. She halted with a gasp, one hand raised to her throat, for the shadow took on form and seeming substance, and addressed her. *"In"*—Mary flicked a dry tongue over dryer lips as she strove desperately to call to mind the charm her mother taught her to ward off evil spirits—*"in nomine——"*

The breath surged back into her lungs, the feeling of constriction left her throat, for the first rays of the rising moon struck on the figure, and a shadow stretched before it on the white road-dust. Ghosts did not cast shadows. Neither did ghosts speak in such substantial voices, rich and deep and musical, velvety and throaty, with the softness which comes from the Roman tongues. "Your pardon, *Mademoiselle,* I fear I startled you."

She laughed in sheer relief. "You did! but——"

"But you forgive me? I did not mean to frighten you, but when I heard your footsteps on the road I thought it best to seek the shadows, since I am where I should not be. Then when I saw it was a girl, and beautiful, I made bold to——" He struck his heels together and bent his shoulders in a courtly bow.

Mary looked at him with interest. Colors do not show with clarity by moonlight, but as nearly as she could make out he wore a habit of fawn-colored velvet, breeches tucked in high jack-boots, sleeves slashed with yellow satin, and above his coat a jerkin of buff leather, sleeveless and fastened down the front with frogs of yellow braid. At throat and wrists were falls of lace; his hands were gauntleted, and from the black hair rippling round his ears he had removed a wide-brimmed hat which bore a plume of curling feather fastened by a silver buckle. A long thin sword swung at his side. When he smiled, his teeth flashed whitely underneath a slim mustache, and his beard was quite the smallest she had ever seen, the merest tussock of black hair beneath his lower lip, as if a beetle had lit on his chin.

"You're from the ship," she decided.

"But yes. Have not I said so? Your amiable magistrates have ordered that my people may not come ashore, but one grows weary of the feel of oak beneath his feet, especially when he has not trod the earth for nine long weeks. Accordingly"—he raised his shoulders in a shrug until his long curls brushed his leather jerkin—*"tenez,* this is not the first time that I have defied authority. You will not call the watch, *Mademoiselle?"*

A dimple showed each side her mouth. "Nay, not I, *monsoor,* the ocean still is overcold for bathing."

He laughed, a merry, chuckling laugh infectious as a yawn, and tucked her fingers in his elbow's crook. "They tell me ghosts and devils and monstrous hobgoblins abound in these parts," he said seriously. "'Twere best I walked with you to keep them at respectful distance."

"Do—do you truly think there are such things?" she asked, and delicious little chills of fear and thrills of terror rippled just beneath her skin. "I've heard of them since infancy, but never have I seen one, or——"

"But certainly," he broke in, nodding with such gravity that she could see he struggled with a grin. "I, myself, Pierre Aristide François Josèphe Fallières, have fought with them on land and sea——"

Her gurgling laughter cut him short. *"Monsoor,* so great a name for such a little man!"

He looked at her, quick anger in his

eyes. Indeed, he was no taller than she herself, and his waist, girt with a sash of scarlet silk, might well have been the envy of the fairest ladies of King Louis' court. But his shoulders had a breadth that spoke of strength, his hips were lean and straight, and when he stepped it was with a light spring that might have come from practise in the dance, or with a sword. "I?—little?" he began; then his words broke short. Laughter started in his eyes, she saw his lashes flickering. "Now that you speak of it, the name *is* longer than the man, *n'est-ce-pas?"* he answered almost gleefully. "Let us not deal with wordy sobriquets, then. Will not you call me Pierre?"

"Pçair?" she essayed doubtfully.

"*Non*—Pierre," he corrected, then: "But even if you do not say it right, I like the way you say it, *ma belle.* How are you called!"

"Mary."

"Marie? A lovely name and one that fits you to perfection. How do they call your surname?"

"Popham. Mary Popham is the name, *monsoor."*

"Popham! *Dieu gracieux,* what shame, what infamy, what savagery! You are lovely as the evening when she walks the earth crowned with a diadem of stars, fairer than the moon as she lies pliant on the ocean's breast, beautiful as that Tyrian Helen for love of whom the wizard Simon Magus forsook books and philtres. Your hair is like the treasured gold of Africa, your eyes are like the emeralds queens swoon to possess, your lips like coral from the Indian sea, and—*mon Dieu*—they call you Popham!"

In all of Mary's nineteen years no one except her parents had ever called her pretty. The color of her hair and eyes had always been a cause for jeering and derision. To be told they were like gold and gems, to have a man swear she was beautiful! "I have heard that the Frenchers speak extravagantly," she answered primly.

"Extravagantly? *Sacre nom,* were I to begin now and speak until I live to be as old as Methuselah's grandsire, I could not finish telling half the story of your beauty, Marie *charmante."*

When they reached her cottage gate she hesitated for a moment, then, greatly daring, bade him enter.

There was a loaf of fresh-baked bread, a roll of new salt butter and a crock of milk in readiness, and on these they feasted as he told her of his wanderings. Orphaned when his Protestant father fell in fighting under Cardinal Mazarin of Spain, he had been made a ward of the great churchman who determined he should be a priest. But after several years of schooling at a seminary in Limoges he decided that the sword and not the tonsure was his destiny, proceeded to take unannounced leave of his school, and shipped before the mast on a bark bound for the Low Countries. There he had taken service with the Staats General and sailed to Africa and the Indies. Finally, he had come as second in command of the *Johan Plomaert* to bear his erstwhile countrymen and co-religionists to the Carolinas.

"But"—Mary's conscience troubled her lest she entertain an emissary of the spiritual and ghostly enemy of the faith—"are you then a Protestant or Papist?"

For the first time she saw sorrow in his laughing eyes. "What have they done to you, *ma chère?"* he asked. "What wicked lies have they taught you? The good God is like gold, precious in whatever place you find Him, whether in the church or meeting-house, the mosque or Buddhist temple. I have worshipped in them all, and found Him in each one." He waved a slice of thickly buttered bread at her:

"How God must laugh at all our little creeds——"

The tread of boots upon the road broke off his discourse, and Mary rose affrighted as she saw the marshal with two musketeers halt at her gate. "Quick, hide you!" she besought. "'Tis Master Tittingwell with his men, and they have muskets."

He seized the mug from which he drank his milk and hid it underneath his jerkin, bent and pressed her fingers to his lips and glided like a shadow to the kitchen garden.

Her hand still tingled with the kiss Pierre had left upon it as she swung the door back in response to Master Tittingwell's sharp knock.

"Good even, Mistress Popham." He spoke gruffly. "There has come word to us that one of the French heretics has disobeyed our laws and landed on our shores, despite our interdiction. We are told he came this way; that he was seen before your door. We must search for him."

"A—a Frencher—*here?*" she faltered. "Surely, they make sport of you. There is no man in this house, for as you know I've lived alone since heaven called my father. But even if a visitor were here"—she spoke much louder than seemed necessary—"he could have made good his escape while we talked. He need only leap my garden wall and follow down the beach to come upon the harbor where the Dutch ship lies."

The marshal brushed her from his path and with his musketeers went through the house and gardens, even looked down in the well, but nowhere was there any sign of the invader.

"What means this food spread out?" he asked suspiciously as he and his men tramped back through the kitchen.

"I—I was an-hungered and cut bread and poured myself some milk——"

"Ay? And do ye drink from two mugs, then?"

"Two mugs? I see but one."

And one there was upon the table, and no more. Search as they would, the musketeers could find no evidence that Mary had a partner at her evening snack.

NEXT day consternation reigned in Fairtown. Two of the watch had come upon one they assumed to be a Frenchman skulking in an alley by the piers, but when they sought to apprehend him he had suddenly become a giant eight feet tall, wrested their staves from them and beaten them unmercifully. In proof of which they both displayed an assortment of fresh bruises, and one of them showed his broken staff. A tippling sailor in the tavern said the bruises might have been made by one who was an expert with the quarterstaff, but the gossips howled his rum-tinctured opinion down. None but a demon, and a very diabolic demon, could have overmastered two stout members of the Fairtown watch.

Mary smiled, but kept her counsel, when she heard the tall tale. That morning on her kitchen doorstep she had found the mug from which Pierre had drunk his milk, and with it a tall bottle of red sherris wine.

Perhaps her smile would not have been so carefree if she could have heard the conversation in the Reverend Butler's study where Master Tittingwell was closeted with the parson. "It is attested, reverend sir," the marshal said. "John Oakes, the cooper's son, who though he is a half-wit is a truthful lad, declared he followed Mistress Popham from the town on yesternight, for he knew she had a sum of money on her, and feared she might be set upon by robbers. At the tree where the malignant hanged himself he saw her pause and wait until another joined her. He wore long lovelocks and

a hat with feathers, and his clothes were gay with trimmings of vain ornament. They stood awhile in talk, then walked along the road until they reached her cottage. Thereupon honest John came back to town to tell the story of the phantom which came from the suicide tree's shadow.

"With Goodman Dykes and Goodman Trotter, both members of the trained band and men of most undoubted probity, I went to Mistress Popham's cottage to inquire of the matter, for meseemed it was a Frenchman, not a phantom, whom she harbored, but——"

The Reverend Butler drew his hand across his face. He suffered from a cold, and pocket handkerchieves were things of vanity, not included in his wardrobe. "And what was it you found?" he asked.

"Nothing, reverend sir. Mistress Popham denied a man was there or had been there. We found food upon the table—bread and milk—but no evidence a man had eaten with her. Howbeit"—he paused and drew a deep breath—"beneath the table was a thing in cat's shape lapping milk from out a saucer. Knowest whom 'tis said she has her kitten of—if indeed it be a kitten—reverend sir?"

"Not I," returned the parson.

"'Tis said 'twas given her by Sarah Upsall, her they hanged for witchcraft three months agone. Sarah Upsall, too, 'twas testified, had an imp that bore resemblance to a cat, and by its aid she worked much mischief to our godly folk."

Long after Master Tittingwell had gone, the parson wrestled with the ghostly problem left with him as Jacob wrestled with the angel. At last he took his Bible up to find an answer to the crux. Both eyes he closed in prayer, then spread the book before him, laid his hand upon the random-opened page and looked to see the verse on which his index finger rested. He started, sucking in his breath like one who fights the coming of a sneeze. Beneath his finger lay the eighteenth verse of the twenty-second chapter of the Book of Exodus:

"Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live."

■

THE June night lay upon the land as if it had been a perfumed sleeping-robe. Crickets chirred and chirped among the weeds, from trees that murmured faintly in the almost breathless breeze came dream-dulled twitterings of sleepy birds, above the roofs a bat wheeled in eccentric circles as she quested midges in the dusk. The roses climbing on the trellis set behind the wishing-well filled the dew-drenched air with sweetness. Westward, the distant hills were mounds of shadow, dulling the luster of a silken sky with purple mists. Beyond the garden little waves broke lazily upon the giant boulders of the beach, their spray as white as ivory filigree on rocks turned silver by the moonlight's alchemy. *"Marie adorée,"* Pierre said, "the ship is once more ready for the sea. We sail upon tomorrow morning's tide."

The breath seemed suddenly to stop in Mary's throat. Her lids seemed scalding with hot tears that somehow would not come, there was a frantic feeling in her breast beside her heart; unconsciously, she raised a hand to soothe it.

"Marie, ma chère, O, Marie de mon coeur, you do then love me?" he exclaimed.

Her eyes looked levelly into his, gray-green, with pupils like twin pools of ebony, something hesitant sunk in their depths. "I—I——" the pressure of her breath dammed back her words, her lips moved at the bidding of her heart, but no sound came from them. Then she was in his arms, so naturally, so simply, so ut-

terly at home in their embrace it seemed as though she were some tired bird, wind-buffeted, wing-weary, come finally to the haven of its nest. Her voice was warm with tenderness and hardly-stifled laughter. "My dear, my dear," she breathed against his cheek, "I've loved you always; before I ever met you, even. I had seen you with my mind's eye, I used to dream of you—I always knew you'd come to me . . ."

Words of love are very sweet, but love's first kisses are still sweeter, and for a long time they had little need of words.

At length: "How do you say 'I love you,' in your tongue, Pierre?" she asked. Then, taught by him, she practised till the syllables were graven on her heart: *"Pierre, m'ami, je t'adore!"*

The breeze that plaited the smooth ocean into little waves bore the echo of eight bell-strokes to them, then one, then two. "Very dearest, you must leave me, now," she told him. " 'Tis an hour past low twelve, and your ship sails with the dawning. And if they find you ere you reach her decks——"

He stopped her with a kiss, then laughed and laid his hand upon the pommel of his sword. "No fear, *ma chère,* knowest not that I live by the soldier's code: *'Pour les dames, le baiser; pour les hommes, l'épée'?"*

"And what might that mean, Master Puss-in-Boots?"

"For the women, the kiss; for the men, the sword!"

"For the *women,* quotha?"

"Mille tonneres, non! I do speak the foolish words of yesterday! Hereafter in heaven and on earth there are no lips but yours for me, Marie belovèd."

"And you will surely come again?"

He took her cheeks between his palms and kissed her on the mouth. "To you and God I dedicate myself, and as I am true to one I shall be true to both. The sea and storm may delay me, but when the fruits are gathered in the storehouse and harvest time is done, I shall come to claim you, *adorée.*" Then with another kiss he left her.

THE dusty road showed white as a healed sword-slash as Pierre walked jauntily toward Fairtown. Joy was in his heart and happiness upon his lips. He hummed a snatch of hymn-tune, a hymn the Huguenots were wont to sing around the altars of their God and in the battle-line:

"Encore un hymne, ma lyre!
Un hymne pour le Seigneur,
Un hymne dans mon délire,
Un hymne dans mon bonheur . . .

"Another hymn, my lyre!
A hymn to God above,
A hymn that springs from ecstasy,
And joy and life and love . . ."

A hundred yards behind him—fifty, thirty—a darker shadow flitted in the shadow of the roadside trees.

9

WHEN Mary had denounced him as the murderer of Goody Upsall, Simon Prowder knew his suit was hopeless, but with an egotism born of uniform success in getting what he wanted—by guile when force could not be used, but preferably by force—he thrust himself into her way at every turn, demanding, rather than entreating, that she give her hand to him. Every day he called upon her, and when her plainly-spoken requests that he cease his visits proved of no avail Mary let him cool his heels outside her door, not deigning to respond to his authoritative poundings on the panels.

In fifty years of pious living Simon Prowder had not ever failed to get the thing he sought, and when Mary shunned

and defied him the sting of wounded vanity and the realization that he could do nothing to amend the matter drove him almost to a frenzy. His passion for her could not be called love, for, except himself, Simon Prowder was incapable of loving anyone or anything, but he longed for her young beauty and bright grace as the aging David lusted after Bath-Sheba's lush charms; he wanted her as a collector of virtu might want a lovely piece of bric-à-brac, or a miser long for gold, finally as a drunkard craves his drink. Day by day desire increased till it became an obsession. The fervor of his appetence grew till it seemed to be a starved wolf gnawing at his very bones. When Mary would have none of him, and refused to speak to or to look at him when they met in the street, he took to hanging round her house at night, watching with eyes hot with craving the reflection of her candle on the window-panes. When the rushlight was extinguished and the mullioned casements gave back pearl-bright mirrorings of moonlight, he turned the iron of cold torture in his heart as he visioned her retirement, in fancy saw her undress lovely limbs and gracious body, plait and bind her glowing hair, finally kneel beside her white-dressed bed to commend soul and body to the coverture of heaven.

When he first saw Pierre meet her in the garden his impulse had been to summon Master Tittingwell and have the French knave haled before the magistrates to be condemned to whipping at the cart's tail, but he quickly reconsidered and rejected this decision. As the Lord God had delivered Jericho to Joshua, so had He put the means to crush this saucy wench's insubordination into Simon Prowder's hands. The Dutch ship must soon sail, and there would be a final meeting of the lovers ere she heaved her anchor from the harbor mud. He would waylay Pierre on his way to join the ship, provoke a quarrel and kill him; then he would confront Mary with the evidence of her dalliance with the alien, and only when she begged his pardon for her obduracy—besought the shelter of his name and husbandship upon her bended knees—would he consent to hold his peace.

10

FAIRTOWN lay as quiet as a phantom city in the early morning. The moon shone brightly on the gambrel roofs, lit the narrow, winding streets, and flooded the wide common with an inundation of bright silver etched in sharp black at its center by a long shadow shaped like an L set upside-down where the gallows tree upreared its stark shaft over the cropped turf.

Pierre paused for a moment to inspect the gibbet. With Gallic cynicism he refused to accept witchcraft as a fact, but he knew that one accused of it had strangled on the scaffold in the past trimester. *"Requiescat in pace,"* he murmured as he viewed the bare-limbed bole. "I doubt not that thy sleep is easier than that of those who sent thee hence, *ma pauvre*——" He swung round, hand on sword, as a moving shadow showed upon the sod beside him.

Less than two fathoms from him stood a man in somber homespun, a steeple-crowned, wide-brimmed hat upon his head, bands of white linen at his neck and wrists. From a baldric swung a ship's cutlas at his left hip, and as Pierre turned he laid his hand upon the weapon's grip.

For a moment they looked at each other, took each other's measure with cold eyes, and hatred leaped into each face with the violent spontaneity of a chemical reaction. Prowder's broad blade flashed as he rushed on the Frenchman,

Pierre's long, slender rapier shone in the moonlight like a silver thread. Their steel clashed musically, and the look of wild elation upon Prowder's face gave way to something like alarm as he felt the firmness of the blade that met his own. Taller by a full head than his adversary, big-boned, thick-sinewed, he had thought to chop Pierre's sword from his hand as easily as he would lop a twig from a tree-bough. Instead, he felt an upward surge of steel, a pressure which despite the double burden of his strength and weight bore his blade back and up. Then, nimbly as an eel escaping from a gloved hand, the Frenchman's slender weapon disengaged, and Prowder saw a point of flickering menace dance before his eyes.

The rapier played lightning-like, weaving glittering patterns in the moonlight; Pierre danced agilely as the shadow of a wind-blown leaf, avoiding heavy slash and devastating lunge, then closed in quickly as a winking eye, thrusting, stabbing, driving with a blade that seemed more quicksilver than steel. Prowder gave back a quick step, another, and the fury faded from his face as fear replaced it, draining off its color, leaving it corpse-gray.

"God is my refuge and my fortress, in Him only will I trust!" he panted, but it was more of a sob than battle-cry; the dread of death, foreknowledge of a swift and certain doom, was on him, and the rage of bitter disappointment flooding through his veins was like a physical sickness. At last he had begun a task he could not finish to his liking; he had chanced a throw with loaded dice, depending on his greater stature and preponderant strength to overthrow his adversary without trouble, and the dice had played him false. He had lost everything upon that fatal throw. According to his lights he was a righteous man. He had tithed and prayed and read the Scripture regularly, he was stedfast in adherence to the Articles of Faith, surely his God would not fail him now. . . .

Then Pierre ran him through the throat and he fell back, his face a mask of torment unendurable, blood trickling from the corners of his mouth and down his chin until it stained his linen collar. He tried to speak, a choking gurgle sounded. He tried to scream a prayer, a seethe of blood boiled in his mouth, and as he toppled backward a horrifying sentence echoed in his inward ear: "You have shed the blood of innocence, and God will give you blood to drink!"

Pierre drew out a cambric handkerchief and wiped his rapier blade with loving care.

Deacon Simon Prowder lay still in the moonlight with the band of shadow that the gallows cast across him like a bar sinister, all the spite, malice and covetousness, all the little good, gone from his face, his life and deeds a closed record of testimony certified for review by a court from whose decisions there lay no appeal.

11

MARY'S trial took all day. Not that the issue ever was in doubt, not that she offered testimony in defense, but the tale of her abominations was so great that it must needs be read at length, and witness after witness begged their worships' leave to bear their evidence against her. The battle had been joined between the Hosts of Light and those of Satan. He who piled a faggot on the fire or cast a stone at the transgressor laid up treasure for himself in heaven.

John Wharton told at length about the morning he and Deacon Prowder—a godly, righteous man who had, alas! been called from this world's misery to the halls of everlasting bliss—had come upon

her as she sate in gossip with old Sarah Upsall. He had not heard the words they said, but doubtless they had been concocting dire plots for the harrying of the elect. Certain it was that she took a cat-shaped thing from out the demon litter of the Upsall witch's familiar and held it to her face, where both he and Deacon Prowder saw it nurse itself at the witch-teat she wore on her cheek, the mark, insensible to pain, which Satan gives his servants when they seal their souls to him and swear to do his bidding evermore. Less than two days afterward old Upsall laid spells on her pious neighbors' churns and cattle, as appeared by the record of her trial. Could any Christian doubt this wicked witchery was the result of the council he and Deacon Prowder interrupted?

John Oakes, the cooper's son, who though he was a half-wit was an honest lad and credible, seeing he had made confession and joined church, deposed he saw her meet the ghost of the malignant at the haunted willow, and saw them both mount broomsticks and sail like darting swallows through the air until they reached her cottage. Afterward, the shining of a ghastly bluish-greenish light had dazzled him, so he ran until he panted like a dog to fetch the marshal and his dauntless musketeers to look into the matter.

Then Master Tittingwell and Goodmen Dykes and Trotter kissed the Holy Book and swore to tell the truth and nothing but the truth. Thereafter they related how they scoured Mary's house and garden, yet found no human being there, but on coming back into the house they found a something which appeared to be a kitten lapping something in the form of milk, yet when Goodman Dykes had sought to stroke it sparks flew from its fur and all but paralyzed his hand, and the white stuff in the saucer boiled and frothed and gave off stinking, choking smoke that smelled like burning sulfur.

The town watch told how they had been set on by a great demon as they made their peaceful rounds the very night the marshal and his posse failed to find a man in Mary's cottage.

Her childhood schoolmates, now grown into respectable goodmen and goodwives with families of their own, related how aforetime Red Men from the forest had declared she was friendly with the Great Spirit—and as every proper Christian knew, the Indians' god was nothing but the white man's Devil.

Finally, most diabolical of all, it was remembered how she caviled at the justice of the sentence passed on old Witch Upsall, had kissed the sorceress before the righteous judgment of the law was worked on her, and cursed the godly Deacon Prowder with a curse of death, saying that he should have blood to drink. In furtherance of this dire prophecy, the deacon had been found on Fairtown Common at the very foot of the tree on which Upsall had been hanged, and blood was dried upon his mouth. Verily, the forces of Satanic malice had been loosed upon the land. The shadow of the awful wings of the Great Adversary was spread between the people and the sun. They had neglected to root out the workers of ungodliness, and for lack of diligence and faith the dreadful judgment of the Lord was come upon them.

MARY gave no testimony in her own defense. Indeed, who would, or could, or dared, speak for her? To tell the court that it had been a man, no demon, who accosted her beneath the haunted willow would be useless, for had not John Oakes, the honest, credible John Oakes who had confessed his sins and been admittted to the bosom of the

church, declared he saw her and her companion ride on broomsticks through the air? Surely, natural men who had no power of the Devil could not do such things. Once or twice she had essayed to speak, but now some women in the congregation were in fits, crying out she tortured them each time her lips were parted. So the outcries of the people drowned her voice, and it was not until the jury found her guilty that a hush fell on the audience as she rose to say her say before the sentence of the law was read to her by Mr. Justice Proctor. Then it was she added blasphemy to witchcraft:

"Your worships, and ye, people of Fairtown, the testimony which convicted me was lies, as those who gave it know full well. There are no witches and no wizards, for Satan when he takes the hearts of men can find enough ways to mislead them into sin without resort to magic. Goody Upsall was a poor old woman who was sinned against most grievously by Simon Prowder for her small land's sake. I'd choose to stand in Sarah Upsall's place in preference to the place of Deacon Simon Prowder when the assize of the Lord is opened and all men must answer for their sins.

"Take my life ye can and will as ruthlessly as ye destroyed my little inoffensive cat which in your ignorance and superstition ye declared an imp of Satan, but in the days to come your children and your children's children will have shame by this day's doings. When in the future claim is made that ye were good and godly men who really understood the message of the Gospel, the things ye did to Sarah Upsall and to me and other innocents like us will stand as testimony of your accusation, and generations yet to be will call ye cruel and blind and savage, and say ye mocked and blasphemed—albeit, perchance, unwittingly—when ye worked your cruelties in the name of God. . . ."

Then the shouting and the clamor drowned her words, and they led her to the jail.

If proof of her debauchery by Satan had been wanting, it was had when she was hanged on Fairtown Common the next day. Just before they drove the cart from under her she called out in a loud voice, not upon the Lord for mercy, not a plea of recantation and repentance, but a heathen, unintelligible sentence in such gibberish-words as witches surely use when they address their lord and master, Beelzebub:

"Pierre, m'ami, je t'adore!"

12

Autumn came, and with it came the harvest. The grain was gathered in, the ripened fruits were stored away against the winter, and the *Johan Plomaert* thrust her blunt bows into Fairtown harbor. Pierre was first ashore, and ran like one who races for a prize until he reached the place where Mary's cottage stood. It was no longer there. The house had been burned to the ground, only its chimney and foundation-stones told where it had been, but in the garden flowers showed among the autumn weeds—phlox and marigold, harebells and love-lies-bleeding. A rose or two hung on the thorny vine that climbed the trellis by the wishing-well. But Mary . . . where was she?

He stopped to drink a stoup of wine at the tavern by the fish-wharf. A dirty pamphlet, soiled with thumbs and beer-stains, lay upon the table, a crudely printed thing with a woodcut illustration on its cover picturing a woman hanging from a gibbet. He flipped it open carelessly and read the opening stanza of

the doggerel ballad while a chill like polar ice spread through his veins:

> "May Popham was a wicked witch,
> A wicked witch was she,
> And fit was she to swing at last
> From Fairtown's gallows tree . . ."

On the north side of the meeting-house they'd laid her, for north was devil's land, fit for witches' graves. The idiot boy, John Oakes, who led him to the place was voluble in narration, but Pierre paid little heed until he heard the story of her hanging. With the sure, retentive faculty of the simple and illiterate, the lout had memorized the devil's-jargon Mary cried before they turned her off, and though the words came thickly, Pierre could recognize them:

"Pierre, m'ami, je t'adore!"

"O, petite Marie de mon coeur," he sobbed into the weeds that grew upon her moundless grave, "to God and you I vowed myself. Did I speak blasphemy . . . did I set up an idol of inordinate affection? God has taken you to Him, only through Him can I come to you at last, belovèd of my heart!"

L'envoi

If you are in New Orleans on the first day of November, be sure to visit old St. Louis Cemetery. It isn't very comfortable, for there is little shrubbery in the high-walled close and the sun beats blindingly upon the paths of broken shell and the little oven-like tombs where the dead are laid aboveground because colonial New Orleans was so marshy that interment in the earth could not be made. But on All Saints' Day the little tombs are bright with flowers, for it is a custom of the Creole City to bear tribute to the dead this day, and no grave lacks decoration, though its tenant may have died a century and more ago and his family long since died out, too.

When you visit old St. Louis, look for a small tomb set in the south wall, with the epitaph:

> *Ci Gît*
> *Jusque La Résurrection*
> *Pierre Fallières*
> *Un Prêtre de Dieu*

That is all. There are no vital data, no word to tell you who he was or when and where he first saw light, or when he died. But if you're fortunate you may meet an old priest coming to the tomb with a great armful of japonicas, and if you ask him about Pierre Fallières, he'll tell you what he knows.

A charming courtesy to visitors characterizes all New Orleans residents. You meet it in the hotels, at the counter in the French Market where you drink black chicory coffee and eat doughnuts light as frothing bubbles. You find it at the bar of the Old Absenthe House, and receive it from the pretty little ladies whom you will encounter in Bienville Street. You find the old priest has it.

"No, *M'sieur,"* he'll tell you, "we know but little of him. Such records as we have deal mainly with his life within the church, how he was a valiant bearer of the Word among the Indians, how almost single-handed he prevented the establishment of an Inquisition in New Orleans during Spanish occupation, and how he preached in the cathedral on holidays. The very day he died he had the sermon at High Mass and spoke upon the text, 'Judge not lest ye be judged.'

"They say he was not born a Catholic. I do not know concerning that, and I know only by hearsay that like the sainted Loyola he laid aside the sword to take the Cross. I have heard his worldly heart was broken by the cruel death of his belovèd. Nor do I know concerning that. I know only he was a brave and tolerant and godly man. May his soul, and the souls of all good Christians, rest in peace.

"Benedicite, M'sieur."

The Magic Mirror

By ALGERNON BLACKWOOD

Of all the schemes to beat the bank at Monte Carlo, the method used by this stranger from Tibet was the most fantastic —and the most practical

IT WAS the last night on board the *Borotania,* as she was due in New York next morning. Most of the passengers were busy packing up in their cabins, so that when I strolled into the smoking-room I found it nearly empty, with only a straggler or two lined up at the bar. Fatty, however, was sitting in his usual corner with his two inseparables, Jimmy and Baldy, whose real names I never discovered.

When I came in, Baldy was talking about systems at roulette.

"There are no systems worth a curse," he was saying. "It's all boloney to say there are. And most of the wheels are crooked, anyhow."

"I guess you're right," Fatty agreed, "though I did once come across a system that was infallible. The trouble was I couldn't work it long enough to make a real killing."

"And how was that?" Jimmy enquired.

"Just that the inventor faded away before we could clean up," explained Fatty. "Hard luck, you call it! Hard luck isn't the right word. It was a catastrophe. That's what it was, Baldy—a catastrophe!"

"Well, let's have the whole lie, Fatty," said Jimmy and Baldy together, "and we'll tell you what we think."

"It's gospel truth," came the rejoinder, "and no lie at all, though I can't blame you if you don't believe it. It was about the strangest thing I ever ran up against —which is saying a lot. To this day I don't know what to make of it. It worked. I will say that for it. But it's got me beat just the same.

"It is some years ago now," Fatty resumed, delighted to have even what he considered a dud audience of two, "that I stayed on rather late at Monte. The season was over, and the Sporting Club, together with a whole lot of the better hotels, closed down. I had my quarters in a small pub on the Rue des Moulins, I remember, as my own joint was closed, too. The grub wasn't too good, and I used to drop in now and again at Quinto's to get myself a good lunch.

"One day, after lunch, I turned into the public gardens to smoke a cigar and look at the flowers before creeping home for a nap; and I remember that the cigar, given to me up at the golf course by a millionaire friend of mine, was particularly good. I was enjoying it, smoking away and feeling at peace with all the world, when I noticed a curious-looking figure moving along the path towards me. He was an oldish fellow with a straggly white beard, and he was wearing a funny sort of hat on his head. I had never seen a hat quite like it before, but I found out afterwards that it was called a 'terai,' or some sort of name like that, and that it was worn a lot in India.

"There were plenty of empty seats all

"They call them devil-mirrors because they bring death and riches."

round me and I prayed to God the old fellow wouldn't come and sit down within talking distance of me and my cigar. Yet that was exactly what he did. The old bozo comes tottering along till he gets to my bench, and then he parks himself bang down quite close to me. Yes, he parked himself just next door, so that I expected the next minute he would turn and ask me for a match.

"But he had his match all right—his stinking cheroot, too—and he lights up and puffs away without a spot of trouble. Now, as you boys know, if there is one thing I cannot stand, it's the smoke from one of those greenhouse bug-killers, so as soon as he got going I was for going, too. I sort of shifted my legs before getting up, and it was just then he turns and looks at me. Did I say 'looks at me'? I can only tell you duds that there was something in his eyes that made me think of lightning. He spoke at the same time. And his first remark somehow took my breath away. I mean by that I hadn't expected it.

" 'Could you tell something about the gambling here?' he asks.

" 'Sure,' I says, getting my breath back a bit, 'sure I can. What's troubling you, stranger?'

"His eyes flashed that queer way again,

but all he gives me back was innocent enough. 'I understand they play a game called roulette,' he says, 'but I don't know anything about it. I'd like to.'

" 'The less you know, the cheaper for you,' I tells him, knowing the answer pat. For he didn't look to me like a man to play the tables, what with his 'Oxford voice' and his strange face that was half a monk and half, I guess, a scholar. 'Keep your money,' I adds, 'if you've got any.'

" 'But I want to make some money,' he explains straight off the reel and quite honest-sounding. 'I've got a plan that's certain.'

"And this time I looks him straight in the eye, lightning or no lightning—though I admit there was something in his eye that made me sort of wonder.

" 'Now, listen, pal,' I tells him, with a fatherly touch that I knew didn't quite come off. 'Listen to me, will you? Every train that pulls into this burg has some sucker on it that thinks he's going to make good dough, but only one in ten thousand ever gets away with it. You take my advice and beat it back to Timbuctoo, or wherever you hail from, and just forget it.' And I takes a good puff at my cigar for having given good advice for once, feeling easy in my conscience, if you know what I mean.

" 'I come from Tibet, not Timbuctoo,' he corrects me slap, flashing those googly eyes my way, 'and I've got with me a magic mirror. I can't lose. It's a magic mirror from Tibet, you see.' And his stinking cheroot puffed across into my face and made me cough.

"WELL, of course, I knew then that the old boy was nuts. That Tibet-and-magic business proved it. And yet there was something about him that had me guessing. I had the feeling that he knew a thing or two I didn't know. I can't express it quite. I knew I was on the wrong tack, anyway. He had something I'd never met before. I was underrating him. He was child-like, crazy—if you like, but he was something else as well. I only know I let my cigar—that millionaire cigar—go out. That shows you, maybe!

" 'What's the great idea?' I says, more easily than I felt. 'Are you going to flash-light from the mirror into the croupier's eye and then grab some dough? If so, I can tell you right now that those methods won't work here. Maybe they're all right back in the sticks in your Tibet, but they won't cut any ice here in Monte!'

"He gave me a sort of patient, half-contemptuous look as though I was a kid.

" 'The mirror,' he says quietly, 'shows me what to play—numbers and colors, or whatever the foolishness is.' And he pulls down that awful hat over his lightning blinkers, puffs out a poisonous cloud, and looks out over the flowers in the garden. In other words, he showed me plain enough that he thought I wasn't yet born.

"Well, this had me fair flummoxed. I just didn't know what to say next. I lit up my cigar again, then threw it away as it no longer tasted good. After a bit I got going again. I asked him how he got his mirror, thinking it a fair question. And he gives me a long spiel about how he had been interpreter with a British expedition into Tibet, and how some lama gave him the mirror. Good stuff, too, right enough. He did the lama some service or other.

" 'They call them devil-mirrors,' he told me.

" 'For why?' I asks, wondering what he'll throw me next.

" 'Because they bring death and riches,' is the answer.

"Meself, I tells him I don't fancy mirrors like that.

" 'You've never seen one,' he says, knowing all the answers.

" 'True,' I tells him. 'Maybe I don't want to.'

"He said nothing for a bit then. I had the feeling he thought I was a nitwit from Kalamazoo. And that's just what I felt, without knowing why—as though he was giving me the works and I was just dumb.

"Then he gets going again.

" 'I am an old man now,' he says. 'I'm over a hundred, if you care to know, and I wish to try this mirror before I die. I promised the lama I would. I must. Only, I need a helper. I cannot do it all alone.'

"Well, this flummoxed me right down to the bone. Either he was nuts or I was! Over a hundred, indeed! Why, those eyes belonged to a young man! I thought it over for a bit. 'Where was I?' I asked myself. 'In Monte or in some weird Tibetan monastery?'

" 'Of course,' I says at length, 'if that's the way you look at it, I've got nothing to say. Have you got the mirror with you? I'd sure like to have a look at it.'

" 'Certainly,' he agrees, and pulls out of his pocket a little chamois-leather bag and produces from it a small bronze mirror. I handled it cautiously, giving it the once-over. It had some curious figures twined round the polished surface—naked men and women, and their faces were awful. I'm pretty hard-boiled myself, but, believe me, those faces made me shudder so I could hardly bear to look at them. The old boy's mug, too, had something in common with them, it strikes me.

" 'Now,' he says, watching me hard, 'do you notice anything peculiar about it?'

"I looked carefully and turned the mirror round in various directions so as to get the reflection of the gardens and the trees. 'No,' I tells him at last, 'I can't say that I do.'

" 'Have you seen your own face in it?' he asked at length, with a smile I didn't care much about. His question gave me quite a shock.

" 'No,' I tell him, 'I have not.'

" 'Just as well,' he says, 'for if you did you would die.'

"With that I hands him back his mirror as quick as I could, but he only laughs quietly to himself and slips it back into its bag. And then I began thinking things over to myself a bit. After all, I thought, you don't get handed devils' mirrors in Tibet for nothing. I guess the old boy had to do his stuff before the lama gave it to him—something pretty tough, too, or one of the local gorillas could have handled it. And so I came to the conclusion it was better not to ask any more questions. The only thing that really mattered was whether the mirror would work or not.

" 'Go in and try it,' I says to him straight. 'Why not?'

"But he has the answer to that, too. 'I must have someone with me,' he explains again. 'When I see the numbers in the glass I can't attend to putting the money on as well. I need a helper, someone I can trust. And I trust you.'

"I HAD got this far when a wave of suspicion came over me. The old boy was a 'con' man, and he was trying to play me for a sucker. I expected every moment his confederate would come rolling up with some plausible yarn, and that they would start stringing me along to put up some dough. I kept my eyes wide open, but I saw no one. And to fill in time I asked him about Tibet. He told me plenty about the country and certainly seemed to know his stuff all right, but as I couldn't check up on it, this didn't get us very far. It sounded genuine, all

the same. He said he had been born at a mission station right on the frontier and that his nurse had been a Tibetan woman. When his parents died he had got a job with the Indian Government, and had now retired with a pension and was on his way to England. He told me a lot, too, about having promised the lama something about the mirror, but I just couldn't make head or tail of that. He wanted, anyway, to use it for getting money, and here in Monte he saw a chance. So I let it go at that.

" 'Sure you've never seen a roulette wheel?' I asks him.

" 'Never,' says he.

" 'Well, I'll take you right along and show you one,' I says, and I bring the old bird down the street till we get to a shop that has them in the window. Half the shops in Monte stock them, as you know, so that we hadn't far to go. I watches the old fox careful to see if he's going to do an act, but he seems genuinely interested, and he soon got wise to the numbers and dozens and all that, and how it worked. Then I asks him how the mirror's going to show him what to back.

" 'I shall see the numbers or the color in the glass,' says he.

" 'Well, if you've got any dough,' I suggests, 'let's go to the rooms and give the thing a whirl.'

" 'I have a thousand francs,' he says, 'if you think that will be enough.'

" 'Plenty,' I tell him, 'if the mirror's any good. But let's start gently with a hundred-franc stake, just to see how she goes. If we win, we go on; if we lose, we don't. How's that strike you?'

" 'We shall win,' he says, calm as you like, 'and half the winnings will be yours. You are entitled to them for your kindness to a stranger.'

"Well, this little spiel goes down very well with me, so I just says 'Thank you,' and takes his hand on it. Talk of a grip! That old hundred-per-center had a fist like iron. Anyway, we wanders over to the Casino and I gets him a ticket for the *salle privée* and in we goes. And, let me tell you, the old bozo was on the up-and-up all right, for when we gets to the rooms he hands over his *mille* and asks me to do the staking while he consults his little mirror.

"Now, as chance would have it, the rooms weren't crowded, and we got a coupla good seats right at the end of one of the tables. I had changed the note into *plaques*, and we were all set. The old guy trots out his mirror and starts staring into it. I watches him close. After a minute or two his face kind of changes. His skin went whiter and his features became sort of fixed and hard. I thought at first he'd dropped off to sleep maybe with his eyes wide open, only I caught a flash of what I call the lightning in them and knew he was just too concentrated to blink. You might have thought he was a flapper going to put the lip-stick on with that mirror in front of him. It was sure a queer sight. I notice the croupier nearest to us seems kind of inquisitive and keeps looking at him, but he doesn't say anything.

"They were paying out just when we sat down, but now they spin the wheel and it is time to stake. I glance at the old crank and he mutters 'Fifteen,' hardly moving his lips. It was fifteen the time before, but all the same, my *plaque* goes on, and sure enough, up she comes—fifteen! Now that, of course, might be just luck, but it gave me confidence, all right, so when next time the old bird mumbles 'Twenty-one,' I shoves on two *plaques* to see if I can't give the bank a jolt.

"And would you believe it, boys? Up she comes as pretty as a picture, while I rakes in the dough, trying not to grin like a Cheshire cat as I does it. And so

it goes on, just as smooth and easy as I'm telling you, and we sure gave the bank a ride that afternoon. But I thinks it wise to stop at last, as the old fellow is beginning to look kind of petered out, it strikes me; so I take him away to the bar and give him a good slug of brandy, and we split the dough as he said, and then I take him back in a *fiacre* to his joint."

"How much did you win?" asks Baldy.

"Sixty *mille* between us up to date, and giving him back his *mille* as agreed.

"NEXT morning," Fatty continued, "I went round bright and early to see how he was making out, and I found him in rather poor shape. So I tried to persuade him to give the rooms a miss that day. Nothing doing!

" 'Lead me to the tables,' he says, firm as a rock. 'It was your brandy that upset me a little, for, you see, I never touch alcohol,' and by his voice you mighta thought he was some professor at Oxford starting up his lecture.

" 'Anyway,' I suggests, 'let's have a good feed first,' and I makes in the direction of Quinto's, for there was a bit of time to fill before the rooms opened. But will he eat? Not a damned swallow, I tell you! Not a single bite!

" 'I shall see better,' he whispers to me, 'if I have no food. But please do not let me stop you. I will wait till you have had a meal.'

"So that's what happened. 'A crank,' I says to myself, 'must turn his own handle the way he wants,' and I left him to it while I enjoyed the best blowout ever with plenty of good liquor to wash it down, and the old boy doesn't hurry me one little bit, sitting there quiet and silent as an Indian idol. And when I'd lit my cigar we roll away in a *fiacre* back to the Casino.

"We go to the same table again, and I notice the croupier recognizes the old guy and exchanges a quick look with another croupier, and the pair of them watch that mirror pretty close, though there's nothing they can say or do about it, for any guy can look in his pocket mirror if he wants to and see if his hair's straight. And, believe me, that mirror does its stuff again fit to beat the band. Or, I should say, beat the bank. For it just couldn't miss. Every time my pal mutters his number, up it comes, though sometimes I don't quite catch what he mumbles and so hold back and don't put a *plaque* on. And when that happens he gives me one of those sort of lighhtning looks that puts the blame on *me* all right. After that I watches his lips. I make no further mistakes, but start playing the dough real heavy till we'd won so much I swear I couldn't count it, and I could see that the croupiers don't like it one little bit, they don't.

"And so it goes on and on, boys, with me watching those mumbling lips like a cat watches a mouse, and making no more miss-hits, till sudden I notice that those lips of his seem kind of white. No blood in them, I mean. I give his face the once-over, and that don't look right to me, either. Made me think of a bladder with the air running out of it. Something was wrong, it seems to me, and I decided we'd had enough for one day and I'd better get him out.

" 'Come on,' I whispers to him. 'Let's go. Give it a rest till tomorrow, pal.'

" 'One more turn,' he whispers back, but the flash from those gig-lamps not quite so bright. 'I'm seeing better than ever before.'

"So I agrees to that. One turn more can't do us any harm, and he sure was seeing perfect.

" 'Thirteen,' he mutters. And on go my *plaques*.

"Now it so happens that he can reach

the number easier than me, so I hand him the dough while I shove a maximum myself on *impair,* just to give the bank a final trimming before we blow.

"The wheel is spinning lovely when I hear a kind of gasp and a sigh from the old boy, but when I turns quick to look at him he seems okay. A moment later the ball settles nice and comfortable in thirteen, and they pay me on *impair* right enough. Then a strange thing happens. The croupier is in the act of shoving the money over to pay the old guy on his number when he stops, then pulls it back again as though the bank had won. I catches my breath and stares a moment. And everybody stares with me. The room had filled to the brim and everybody had been watching our play. There came sudden an awful silence.

"I got my breath back.

" 'What's the matter?' I cries out. 'Pay the old man his winnings!'

"And the croupier turned to me without a smile.

" *'On ne paye pas les morts,'* he said quietly, raking the money in.

"The old boy was dead—dead as a door-nail. He had croaked while the wheel was spinning. Can you beat it for bad luck? I looks round quick to see that no one had pinched the mirror, but I'm damned if it isn't broken into a thousand pieces.

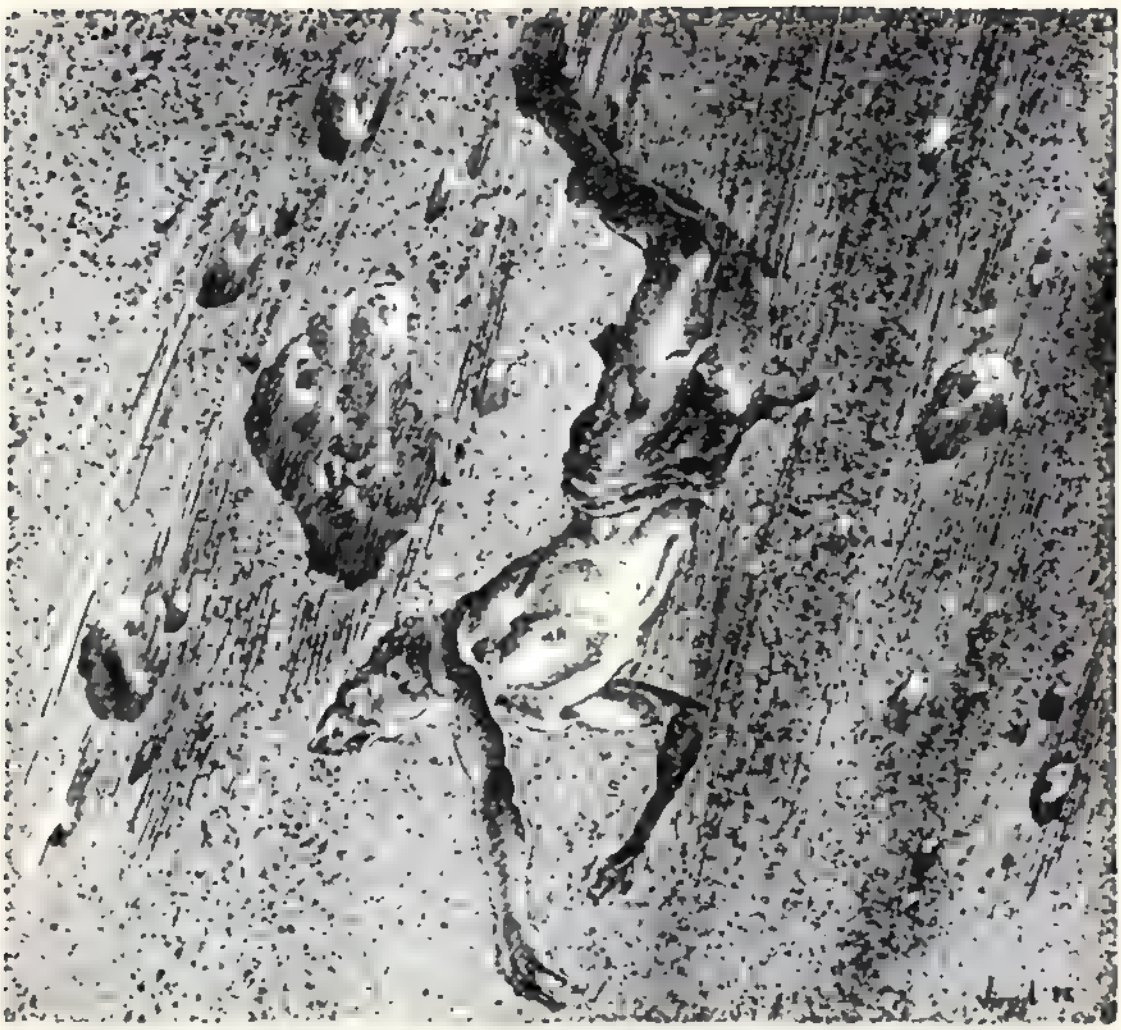
"Isn't life just plain hell?"

The Wreck

By ALFRED I. TOOKE

A hundred and fifty fathoms deep it rests on the ocean floor,
With a gaping hole in its crumpled bow that serves as an open door
To a cavern dim where a skeleton grim keeps guard in a gilded suite
Whose polished floor shall throb no more to the rhythm of dancing feet;
For Death swept out of a starlit night, to mock at Life's futile stand,
And drag the arrogant liner down in the clutch of its icy hand,
And souls were stripped of their false pretense, and shown as they really were;
And many a braggart raved and screamed, or whined like a cringing cur;
While many a so-called weakling rose that night to a new estate,
And shrugged his shoulders and wore a smile as he bowed to the will of Fate.

And there, in the cavern, the dead man's bones guard treasure for ever lost,
That he tried to save from the grasping wave as the gangway of Death he crossed.
A hundred and fifty fathoms deep he rests on the ocean floor,
In a barnacled coffin of steel that cost a million dollars or more,
And his bones are hid by an inky squid that spawns in the gilded suite
Whose polished floor shall throb no more to the rhythm of dancing feet.



"It threw itself over the jagged cliff of the mountainside."

The White Rat

By EARL PEIRCE, JR., and BRUCE BRYAN

An eery tale of strange surgery, and a revolting monstrosity that was created by the daring attempts of an imaginative surgeon to modify nature's laws of heredity

TWO strangely contrasted men sat facing each other across an oak table in the Svabord Inn, high in the mountains that split the rugged length of Norway. A trained psychologist might have observed an air of electric tension as, during a lull in the conversation, their eyes locked in mutual covert appraisal.

Amesson, who despite the comfort-

able warmth of the room was bundled up to the ears in a heavy coat and muffler, was the first to drop his gaze behind his dark glasses. Peter Driscoll was the less shifty of the two, yet there was an appropriate furtiveness in his manner. For the reputation behind these men stretched across the world and might have spelled bloodshed and riot had anyone recognized them. Both had more than once been burned in effigy.

Sigurd Arnesson wet his thin lips nervously and spoke in his high, squeaky voice.

"Now that I'm convinced you are really the man I sent for, we can speak freely. It is doubtful if anyone will know us here. And the fact that I am just recovering from a touch of the flu provides me with an excellent excuse for keeping my features well swathed. Besides which, the falsetto hoarseness imparted to my voice by swollen bronchial tubes is an additional disguise."

Driscoll nodded shortly.

"I understand that, doctor. But I'm more curious to learn just why you wanted me to meet you here. Familiar as I am with your standing in the world of research, I'm at a loss to conceive of any way in which I could be of value to you."

Arnesson waved his mittened hand deprecatingly.

"The less said about our—ah—standing in scientific circles, the better," he coughed. "Let us speak frankly and entertain no false modesties. We have both made certain invaluable contributions to knowledge. That cannot be denied. It is our methods alone that, to borrow from your American slang, have relegated us to the dog house. A few hundred years ago we'd have been burned at the stake. Indeed," he added with a distasteful sort of chuckle, "if certain self-righteous persons could lay hands on us we might still be roasted over a slow fire."

He paused, his head turning about the room with odd, jerky movements. A queer noise came from behind his muffler, as if he were sniffing at the atmosphere, and his little eyes peered sharply through the smoked lenses of his glasses. Driscoll waited patiently, though consumed with curiosity.

"You are quite wrong in assuming that you have nothing of value to me," resumed Arnesson, after a moment. "No matter what his attainments, one man can never learn all there is to know of any given subject. Generations of scientists in pursuing all the ramifications of medicine and surgery have barely scratched at an inexhaustible source of knowledge. One person, in concentrating on a certain phase, must of necessity rely on a superficial understanding of another closely associated phase. That, Driscoll, is where you come in."

The younger man ran his fingers through his sparse, prematurely whitened hair.

"I still don't understand——" he began.

Arnesson lifted his shapeless mitten jerkily, interrupting.

"You will! You will! But first—I must tell you a story. You have the patience to listen?"

Driscoll nodded, and settled back in his chair.

"How about another glass of ale in the meantime?" he asked.

Arnesson acquiesced and thumped on the table to attract attention. It was not long in forthcoming. The season was late winter, and there were few guests in the inn. Looking out of the window, Driscoll could see over the low roof of the village the open fjord, winding down to the sea. Sundhjem nestled at the foot of snow-capped mountains, and at this

time of year there were few tourist ships stopping at its icy harbor.

The door opened and the innkeeper's daughter, a plump, red-faced girl of seventeen, smiled in at them. In her arms she cuddled a large gray cat, purring with a contented somnolence. But suddenly its back arched and the hair stood out on its body like the quills of a porcupine. Spitting and hissing, its eyes fastened on Driscoll's companion. It squirmed and twisted in the girl's arms.

DRISCOLL turned his gaze back to Arnesson in some surprize. He was astonished to see that the man had pushed back his chair and, half standing, was regarding the animal with something like terror in his attitude. And yet there was an almost predatory malevolence glaring out of the small eyes behind those smoked glasses. It was only a momentary tableau, but Driscoll felt an odd chill settle over him. Then the cat drove its claws into the girl, forcing her to release it. It dropped to the floor, still spitting, its lips drawn back in a fanged snarl, turned tail and fled.

The girl was weeping softly, nursing the red scratches on her arms. But Driscoll paid no attention to her; he had crossed quickly to Arnesson's side. The man had slumped back in his chair, breathing heavily, like a sleeper just aroused from a horrible nightmare. He waved the American away.

"It's—nothing," he said quietly. "I'm all right. Just an attack of asthma. I've been subject to them at intervals ever since that damned influenza. But I—I wonder what was wrong with that—that cat."

Driscoll said nothing as he returned to his seat.

"Bring us more ale," he ordered the girl. "Put some iodine on those scratches and you'll be all right."

But when the ale was set before him he didn't touch it. Arnesson had plunged into his story, and if Driscoll hadn't known of the man's reputation and achievements, he would have thought himself listening to a lunatic. Was this what he had come all the way from New York for? To hear the ravings of an apparently unbalanced mind? To listen to pure fantasy from the lips of a man who had wrought unbelievable miracles in experimental surgery?

Fascinated, he listened despite the instinctive warnings of his own subconscious mind.

"Surgery," Arnesson was saying, "is the greatest gift accorded to mankind. It is the most wonderful tool of science. But, like any other tool, it is limited to the craftsmanship of the artizan. To me, therapeutic surgery is only an incidental use, beneficial to the immediate patient alone. In this respect I agree with your talented Bainbridge that the knife cures the patient but not the disease. He was alluding to cancer, of course, but the same applies to the whole of pathology.

"I wasted thirty years of my life curing patients, most of whom were killed later by motor vehicles or bullets. A thankless job, but not without its illuminating lessons. I've learned a great deal from my patients, the essence of which is that they aren't worth saving. Man has become too far submerged in sentimentalities and idiotic conventions, much to the detriment of pure science. Pure science, utterly indifferent to weakness and suffering, is the only science, Driscoll!"

The younger man said nothing, acutely aware that his companion was leading up to a definite point.

"Take your own work, for example," went on Arnesson in his queer treble tones. "Men have dreamed of revivification ever since the earth's first burial. Witness the funereal preparations of the

ancient Egyptians. You can't persuade me that the months they spent in mummifying a body were dictated solely by religious ritual. Not by a long shot! They believed they were preserving the dead against the time when some one of their wise men would discover the means to bring them back to life. Religion preaches resurrection, but not by human means. It has taken ten thousand years for the enlightened among humanity to accept revivification as a material possibility. That, Driscoll, is due to your researches."

"Yes," broke in the younger man bitterly, "and look what it's done for me! Hunted across the continent, from city to city, and forced to give up my work and live in New York under an assumed name. Sometimes I——"

Again Arnesson threw up a shapelessly gloved hand in that curious jerky movement of his.

"I know, I know. But never mind that now. Even your experiments have only scratched the surface. You have resurrected animals—not human beings. And only by freezing them to death beforehand."

"Where's the difference?" objected the American. "What I have done with a dog, I could do with a man. Both have similar circulatory systems, a similar network of nerves. Each has a brain developed to his needs. If the law, actuated by a lot of sentimental nitwits, hadn't stepped in——"

"Exactly!" agreed Arnesson, jerking his head emphatically. His squeaky voice lent intensity to his words. "That's my point. What you have done with beasts can also be done with men. I repeat, surgery is a tool, and there is no limit to the wonders it can shape—in the proper hands."

He hesitated, as if taking a deep breath. Driscoll squirmed uncomfortably. He thought he could detect a reddish gleam in the piercing little eyes behind those dark glasses. Arnesson leaned across the table, and his voice sank.

"I'm going to tell you something, Driscoll—something that I could tell to no lesser man. Perhaps I'm a fool to do so, but—did you ever hear of the Russian surgeon, Igor Seminoff?"

"Never," replied Driscoll.

Arnesson nodded his bundled head.

"Apparently there is no one alive who remembers him. It is just as well. Seminoff was the most revolutionary surgeon who ever lived. He performed a series of experiments of such a ghastly nature that to the ignorant peasants of the region his name became almost synonymous with Satan. Fortunately, his work was not made generally public. He didn't care a damn for science or the acclaim of his colleagues. He worked for himself alone. Igor Seminoff was at once a madman and a genius."

Arnesson hesitated a moment, as if seeking courage to go on. He looked about apprehensively, as if afraid the walls might have ears, then hissed almost malefically:

"Seminoff spent fifteen years trying to develop a man-sized white rat endowed with human intelligence!"

DRISCOLL stared at Arnesson with an almost vacant expression. Yes, he decided wearily to himself, the man is mad.

"Tell me about it," he said placatingly, wondering how he could break away. Nothing, he knew, is more dangerous than an insane person who realizes his wild ravings are not believed.

A squeaky, unpleasant laugh came from the bundled-up figure across the table.

"I'll tell you about it, all right," he whispered grimly. "Then if you still think I'm crazy, perhaps you'll go to the

asylum with me—because *I'll show you that rat!* Now pay close attention:

"Seminoff was the illegitimate son of a Georgian landowner and a Russian peasant girl. The father took him to live on the farm where, at an early age, his curious talents exhibited themselves. A cow had broken its leg. Because it was a valuable milker, the farmer was reluctant to shoot the animal. Young Seminoff astounded the old man by setting the fractured limb in expert fashion and rigging up a harness to confine the creature to its stall until the bones knit.

"Much impressed, the father provided the money for his son to study medicine. And the peasants were only too happy to see him go away, for their slumbers had been interrupted many a night by the frightful squealing of some poor beast strapped down to a wooden table while the boy experimented with his crude, home-made scalpels.

"The youth studied in Paris under Claude Barnard, but in 1870 he was driven out because of his ruthless vivisection of dogs and cats. He moved to Vienna, and finally to Russia. But in those days surgical research was frowned upon and vivisection was a capital crime. Hounded by outraged populaces, persecuted by the law, Seminoff eventually sought out an isolated region in the Scandinavian mountains. Here, in northern Norway, he found an ideal place in which to carry on his work.

"Building himself a crude log laboratory, he set traps and gathered together as many animals as possible. He had a definite conception of what he wanted to do, and at first he worked with dogs, lemmings, and even wolves. But when, owing to their physiological peculiarities, his efforts produced no great results, he turned to white rats. He found them ideal for his purpose.

"As the scope of his researches widened, he found it necessary to have help. Several thick-headed Norwegian hunters were hired as job-workers. And at the end of the third year he married a strong, capable woman of the same nationality. Perhaps she was a little mad, too, for she became not only a helpmeet but a disciple. The two worked side by side for nearly fifteen years, and at the end of that time had bred rats to the size of dogs and to even greater intelligence. There was no necromancy involved in the work—it was purely a surgical procedure. Whether he employed human secretions is not known, but in some way he must have duplicated the endocrinal system of man.

"I'll spare you the details, which even to a doctor would seem brutal, for it was like heathen butchery. Except on the skull, the hair ceased to grow. Certain rat-like appendages were removed with the knife, until the creatures became remarkably anthropoid in structure and could be taught a rudimentary discipline. But Seminoff wanted a rat with the ability to *reason.* So he worked on, utilizing the elementary laws of mechanics and making use of Hooke's principles of stress and strain.

"How it was possible to create that final rat is probably a secret no man will ever know. Perhaps Seminoff stooped to mating human and animal cells. You can imagine the cool, horribly detached enthusiasm with which the later stages of the work must have been carried on. It is one thing to vivisect an ordinary white rat, but to cut into one that can sense your motives is something else again. At any rate, when he was finished he had a creature that was a perfect example of synthetic anthropomorphic structure. It was more than five feet tall and had a mental age comparable to that of a human moron."

ARNESSON paused to sip from his glass of ale. Driscoll had ceased to think of escape. This man talked like one positive of his facts.

"I agree that it was a remarkable achievement, horrible as it must seem," Driscoll pondered slowly. "But apparently it was foredoomed to failure. Obviously, man cannot——"

Arnesson thumped the table with his glass.

"Doomed to failure, eh?" he cried, almost bitterly. "Does this sound like failure to you? Seminoff completed the rat's education with long years of study and training, both mental and physical. As the—the thing learned to wear clothes, to walk and talk and *think* like a man, the assistants Seminoff had engaged disappeared mysteriously. But for several years the surgeon and his wife lived on in that place with the awful hybrid. It became, in a depraved sense, their child, absorbing all the knowledge they could impart to it. However degenerate its mind, it was possessed of a remarkably imitative nature.

"But Seminoff's madness crept upon him during these final years, to cheat him of his victory—a victory that was truly Pyrrhic. In recurrent fits of melancholic brooding he actually became jealous of the creature's place in his wife's affections. He took a morbid delight in torturing his own inhuman creation. And then one day it turned on him and battered him into insensibility. Fired with blood-lust, it carried him into the dissecting-room, strapped him to a table and hacked him to pieces with a scalpel. The surgeon's wife tried to intervene, but the rat-man attacked her with an unbridled fury.

"When she recovered consciousness, it was gone, leaving its tracks in the snow. She managed to harness a horse to a sleigh and escape to the nearest village. Poised between life and death, she lingered for nearly a year before dying. It was from her lips that the village doctor learned this story. And except for one thing he would never have believed it. The rest of the wild tale must of necessity be hypothesis, as we have only the charred remains of Seminoff's laboratory to guide us.

"The white rat had returned and, after destroying the Russian's body, obliterated all traces of the murder. It was human enough to realize the blasphemy of the experiment and was resolved that nothing like it should ever occur again. With the destruction of the surgeon's scientific notes and the remaining animals, there was only one thing left to do away with —*itself!* Reflect for a moment, Driscoll, on the contradictory mentality of a synthetic creature that could reason with such selflessness. Realizing that its own brain contained the abysmal formulæ that enabled Seminoff to carry out his work, the rat was determined to wipe the slate clean.

"It committed suicide by throwing itself over the jagged cliff of the mountainside."

Sigurd Arnesson relaxed in his chair and toyed with his glass. The younger man said nothing. He was convinced now that the man across from him was not mad, despite the insanity of his unbelievable story. But he felt that there was more to come. The narrative was incomplete. He was both curious and afraid.

Though he couldn't see Arnesson's features through the winding muffler, he sensed that the man was smiling at his hesitation to comment.

"Yes," said the Norwegian, "there is a sequel—a sequel that involves us both. I am determined to carry on the work of Igor Seminoff—carry it to a climax his mad intellect never could have dreamed!"

Driscoll uttered an incredulous exclamation.

"Impossible! You said the formulæ were destroyed. And the rat—dead."

A squeak of satiric amusement came from behind the Norwegian scientist's muffler.

"Quite true. And that, my dear Driscoll, is where you come in! Fifty years ago—the winter of 1886, to be exact—Norway suffered in the grip of an almost unprecedented cold wave. I don't know just how deep the snow was, but at the foot of the cliff it broke the rat's suicidal plunge. In the blizzard that followed, its body was enveloped, frozen into a state of perfect preservation."

The American wet his lips.

"You—have the body?" he whispered.

Arnesson nodded jerkily.

"That's why I summoned you here. You, Driscoll, are the only man in the world who understands the intricate technique of revivification. We are going to bring that rat back to life!"

Driscoll half rose to his feet.

"B-but fifty years!" he protested.

A shapeless, mittened hand waved him back in his chair.

"Imprisoned in a block of ice—what difference between fifty years and fifty seconds?"

Bells jingling merrily, two spirited horses breathed heavy steam from their wide nostrils as they drew the open sleigh swiftly over a rolling white waste. Grotesque in his heavy greatcoat and concealing muffler, Arnesson drove. Driscoll huddled beside him, finding little in the way of conversation to while away the journey. Thirty miles back they had left the tourists' road, and the loneliness in which they found themselves was made more appalling by the bleak grandeur of the encircling mountains. All day they drove steadily onward into a naked, unpopulated country.

An endless glacier bounded one side of the trail; the other skirted a snow-choked abyss. Trees grew in dwarfish clusters and far apart. A biting wind keened over stark, white-mantled rocks. And as the sun began to wane, Arnesson urged the horses to a faster gait.

"You may be sure we won't be disturbed up here," he confided to his companion. "This road is a frozen hell at night."

Driscoll said nothing. What strange hypnotism had caused him to accompany the Norwegian surgeon on this trip? No doubt it provided a wonderful opportunity to complete the last link in his unfinished work. By revivifying this hybrid creature he would prove his theory of artificial resurrection. Still, apprehension tormented him. It was a mad quest, an unhallowed business he was engaged upon.

"My place is built right over the ruins of Seminoff's laboratory," Arnesson was telling him. "It is an exhilarating location; you can work seventeen hours out of twenty-four without fatigue in such atmosphere."

Blackness had settled down when they reached their destination. There was no light save the Norwegian's flashlight. He stabled the team in a large barn, and after seeing to it that they had plenty of oats led the way through deep snow to the living-quarters. In the beam of the flashlight Driscoll could see that there were several buildings constructed of unhewn, unbarked logs chinked with cement.

Ushering his guest into a roomy living-room, Arnesson switched on the lights, apologizing because there were no servants.

"I manufacture my own electric power," he added. "Inasmuch as I expected

to return tonight, I left the generator going."

A huge log fire was started, and Driscoll began to shed his outer garments. But the Norwegian kept himself bundled up, explaining that he was taking no chance of a recurrence of his influenza. They ate their supper in a compact little kitchen, complete down to modern refrigeration. Immediately after the meal the American asked to be shown the laboratories. He was somewhat excited now that he was about to see the preserved corpse of the white rat.

Arnesson seemed to hesitate a moment; Driscoll raised his eyebrows expectantly. Shrugging his high, narrow shoulders, the Norwegian led the way through a maze of corridors. But there was a queer reluctance in his manner, and insidiously it worked on his guest's sense of well-being.

At the end of the main hall was the animal house, teeming with experimental material. There were dogs, cats, lemmings, a few snakes, and even a lean, slavering gray wolf. But mostly there were rats—small white rats that chittered and squeaked incessantly. As Arnesson passed, these dainty little creatures came close to the front of their cages, thrusting their pointed little heads eagerly through the wire. But the surgeon paid no attention. His dark glasses were turned furtively toward the cats, who cowered back in wild agitation, spitting and arching their sleek backs.

Passing through a clinical anteroom, the two entered the main surgical chamber. Here, to his amazement, Driscoll found himself in what might have been a miniature of some great New York operating-theater. Overhead hung a huge spot-lamp. Flanking an enameled operating-table were cabinets filled with gleaming instruments, great cylinders of ether, nitrous oxide and oxygen. And in one corner reared a massive X-ray apparatus.

As if he wished to avoid being drawn into a technical discussion, Arnesson led the way through another door into what he termed his chemical and biological laboratory. Still another door, and finally they stood before the enormous electric refrigerator in which the surgeon kept the body of the white rat.

A little giddy, the younger man watched him wheel open a circular metal door. Grasping a handle, Arnesson drew out a long tray that moved easily on well-oiled rollers. A heavy white tarpaulin shrouded something stiff and bent. Grimacing, the Norwegian pulled the canvas away, exposing a contorted mound of bluish-white flesh.

Driscoll gasped and retreated a step. The creature lay on its back, naked, the immense head facing him in a frozen stare. It was long—as long as a man—and the American's first impression was that it was indeed a human cadaver. But the horror of the thing struck him like a physical blow. Its limbs were short and grotesquely twisted. The back was oddly bent, stiffened into a crippled arch. From the pale flesh sprouted white hairs that belied its human appearance. Two rows of long, discolored teeth seemed bared in a vicious snarl. The eyes were open, like windows of hell; small, pinkish little orbs glazed in death.

"Grisly, eh?" whispered Arnesson.

Driscoll shuddered.

"God! How could any man do this?"

The Norwegian grunted, squeakily. Driscoll couldn't see through the muffler, but he sensed a sneer on the older man's lips.

IN THE room his host assigned to him, Driscoll unpacked his suitcase. The silence of the place was emphasized by the wind that clawed at the window. He

shivered. A sense of loneliness had come over him. He felt like a man alone in an alien world. There was no sense of companionship in the presence of Arnesson. The surgeon had lost his friendly demeanor; here in his secluded laboratory he was alternately harsh and polite, but never cordial.

A nerve-shattering scream, shrill and pain-racked, echoed through the walls. It rose to a sharp crescendo, then choked off into a cough that rasped with agony. Driscoll whirled, stared at the closed door. That was no animal's cry! It was a man—a human being in horrible torture!

His eyes narrowed. Slowly, the door was opening. Driscoll glanced toward his bag. There was a gun there. He started toward it. Then Arnesson's muffled head showed in the opening.

"Just wanted to see if you are comfortable here," said the Norwegian, his treble tones failing to conceal a hint of agitation.

"Who was that screaming?" demanded Driscoll, ignoring the man's words.

Arnesson stared at him for a moment, but the American could make nothing of the expression of eyes veiled by smoked glasses.

"Why, that's one of my animals, coming out of a drug," explained the surgeon. "Endocrinal case. Has interesting complications. I'll discuss it with you some other time. No doubt you're quite tired. Good night!"

Driscoll gazed at the door slowly closing behind Arnesson's angular shape. Vague doubts, incoherent fears, were churning about in his brain.

He gnawed at his lip, angered by the man's obvious lie. That voice was human! What manner of charnel house had he come to?

Suddenly the door swung open again. The surgeon's muffled head reappeared.

"Oh, yes," he said. "A word of warning, Driscoll. Keep to your room at night. Don't wander in the halls. It might be—extremely dangerous. I have private interests here that don't concern you. This is an order!"

Driscoll stiffened. He didn't like the man's tone.

"You are my superior," he admitted, "but only up to a certain point, and in a consultatory way. I don't know what you are doing here, but frankly it smells bad to me. What have you got locked up in the animal room?"

A snarl came from behind Arnesson's muffler.

"None of your damned business! I didn't say the room was locked. See that you stay in your room. I'm sorry if you don't like my methods, but you're here now and you can't get back till I take you. I might even tell you that you won't ever leave—until the white rat has been brought back to life!"

The door closed behind him. Driscoll stood with an unspoken curse on his lips, half expecting to hear a key turn in the lock. But it didn't; evidently Arnesson considered his warning sufficient.

The American took his pistol from the suitcase and slipped it into his pocket. Replacing his shoes with felt slippers, he opened the door and peered up and down the corridor. At one end was the generator, but aside from its low-keyed hum there was no sound. Driscoll walked silently toward the living-room, pausing at a door that opened into the library. He looked in and his glance fell on a littered desk. Beyond was a door that led into the surgery.

The desk was covered with an untidy scramble of books and papers, all surgical references. Pinned to the stage of a microscope was a glass slide. Driscoll peered into the instrument and recognized what he saw as a microsection of the brain of a

white rat. A strange odor, penetrating the iodoformic smell with which the whole building reeked, came to his attention. Looking down, he saw a huge, half-eaten cheese.

Cheese! For a moment his senses reeled. The top of the desk was crumby with the stuff. Incredulously, he bent over and rubbed his finger across the blotter. It was sprinkled with long white hairs. . . .

His mind conjured up a mad vision of that cadaverous, sparse-haired rat-creature sitting at the desk and nibbling cheese, while its scrawny finger traced out the directions printed in Fougerai's *Cranial Surgery*. Great God! could the thing translate from the French? He laughed at the absurdity.

With an effort, he pulled himself away from the desk and walked toward the surgery. What was he muttering to himself about? The rat was dead, wasn't it? Frozen solid for half a century or more. Rats aren't the only animals that eat cheese. Man is an animal; he likes cheese, and—he has white hairs.

The surgery door swung open and pungent antiseptic fumes swept into his face. The room was unoccupied, save for the inanimate dissecting-material that hung like horrible pink fruit in jars of formaldehyde. Ether tainted the air, and red-stained towels and aprons lay across the operating-table. The table itself was still warm, as if recently used. In a shallow basin were wads of cotton, dissecting-instruments clotted with blood and several bits of flesh from which the white hairs still sprouted. Soiled rubber gloves lay carelessly on the floor.

Repressing an exclamation of repugnance, Driscoll flung open the opposite door and ran down the corridor to the animal room.

As he approached it, the squeals of excited animals sounded a demoniac symphony in the vapor-laden air. But there was also a human voice—Arnesson's. It rapped out, high-pitched and querulous, but carrying a note of authority. Driscoll's hair stirred as he heard other sounds, uttered apparently in answer to the Norwegian—shrill, complaining, gibbering noises. The words—if such they could be called by some wild flight of imagination—were strange, guttural, non-understandable.

Driscoll hesitated. Arnesson had said he had private interests. The American shuddered a little. He could well imagine what they consisted of if they concerned Arnesson, the vivisectionist. He was about to turn back to his room, when again he heard that wild scream. He lunged against the door, fell into the room between a tier of cages.

"What's going on h——" he began, only to bring up short with a gasp of revolted horror. He stumbled back, eyes bulging, jaw slack. "I—I thought I heard Doctor Arnesson in here," he whispered unsteadily.

A tall, thin form stood before him, slavering with rage. It was clothed in white. The head was enormous, the face sharp and predatory. Scrubby white hairs grew from the pinkish flesh; the shoulders were high and narrow, hunched together grotesquely. Red little eyes glittered angrily.

The creature stood for a moment, glaring at the intruder. There was mixed fear and fury in its bestial expression. Then a shrill squeal came from its lips. A clawing arm swept viciously at the air. It whirled suddenly and sped to an open door at the other end of the room. The door closed, a lock clicked, and from behind it came another burst of beast-like wrath.

Driscoll shook himself.

"Arnesson!" he roared. *"Arnesson!"*

Down the long room he stalked, caught the knob of the door and rattled it fiercely. It didn't budge. Like a madman, Driscoll strode back up the length of the room, between the cages. An insane rage tore at his brain.

"Arnesson!" he bellowed again, frightening the creatures back in their cages.

The door by which he had entered was flung open. Arnesson's muffled figure was framed against the dim light of the corridor.

"I thought I told you to keep to your room!" he snapped. "I ought to kill you for this!"

Sight of the other man's anger calmed Driscoll to something approaching normal. He wiped a hand across his brow.

"What in God's name was that—that *thing?*" he whispered. "What are you doing to it?"

Arnesson started toward him, a low snarl emanating from behind his muffler. His mittened hands balled into great fists.

This was something Driscoll could understand. His hand slipped into his pocket, emerged with the pistol. Unwaveringly, it centered on the Norwegian's breast.

Arnesson stopped. A shudder went through his tall frame.

"I—I'm sorry, Driscoll," he muttered. "There are things here it's best even you do not know—or see. What you saw just now is not an experiment. It's a—a patient."

"A monster, you mean!" Driscoll returned the gun to his pocket. "For a moment I thought it was the white rat come to life. I'm sick of this place, Arnesson. I'm going back—tomorrow."

Arnesson's small eyes blinked rapidly behind his dark glasses.

"How can you understand?" he said slowly. "How can anyone understand? I didn't want you to see what you have seen—but that can't be helped now. No, I assure you the white rat is dead. Its body is still in the refrigerator, if you wish to make sure."

The American shook his head impatiently.

"Then what—what was it I saw?"

Arnesson shifted his weight from one foot to the other. A sickly laugh came from his muffled lips.

"I didn't tell you all the story, Driscoll. I hoped you wouldn't have to know. I thought I could get you up here, have you perform your part of the operation, and then send you back ignorant of the true state of things. But I was a fool. What you saw in this room just now was not the white rat—*it is his son!*"

Driscoll staggered back a pace.

"Impossible!" he cried. "The white rat died—it had no mate!"

The Norwegian was silent for a moment. Then he sighed, a gusty, dry exhalation of air.

"No *animal* mate," he corrected gently. "You remember Seminoff's wife? I told you how the rat turned from Seminoff to his wife. . . ."

Driscoll's eyes widened in horror; his lips moved soundlessly.

"It was merciful that she died," continued Arnesson desperately. "The creature you saw—he hasn't always been like that. He was born a natural babe, grew into normal manhood. In fact, the physician who attended the mother considered the infant as Seminoff's own son. It wasn't until six years ago that the—the paternal heritage began to assert itself. Can you wonder why it has been concealed—why I have sworn myself to secrecy? My God, Driscoll! Imagine the man's sensations as day by day his body changed—changed physically and mentally."

Driscoll shook his head vaguely, his tongue paralyzed with loathing. Arnesson was rambling on.

"He came to me. I was the only living man who could help him. But the transformation had already begun. The jaw was long and attenuated. The body was thin to emaciation, the skull flat beyond all normal cephalic indices. Hair, that silky white hair, was growing out of his pinkish flesh. His posture became stooped, his voice shrill and squealing. It was a horrible degeneration, swift and violent. Almost overnight the metamorphosis cleft him into two personalities, the rat dominating. He began to assume the appearance of his hybrid father.

"I brought him here, Driscoll, giving up my own researches. There was no one to bother me, no anti-vivisectionists to interfere with my treatment. It had to be vivisection in its fullest sense. I had to cut out the rat flesh piece by piece. But it was too fast for me, the rapidity of growth and regrowth. And as if that were not problem enough, there was the gradual atavism of the brain.

"As far as was possible, I kept my patient under the influence of drugs. The pain accompanying my operations was frightful; it was even worse than Seminoff's original work. Yet what could I do? He wanted to live, and under the Hippocratic oath I was bound to make every effort to save his life; forced to keep him alive when every day the rat influence became stronger, and day by day he degenerated from man to beast.

"Then one day I found the frozen body of his father. The summer thaws had released it from the bondage of the ice, and thrilled with a sudden inspiration I had it conveyed up here to my laboratory. Then, Driscoll, I sent for you. For inside the father's brain, impressed over a period of many tortured years, are the formulæ with which Seminoff combated the rat poison in his initial creations. All other records were destroyed by fire. But by bringing the white rat back to life, I can discover the nature of the secret drugs the Russian scientist employed. Once I have learned this I shall destroy the rat for all time.

"You, Driscoll, with your knowledge of revivification, are the only living person who can make this possible!"

DRISCOLL slept very little that night, and even those scant moments were haunted by nightmare shapes that pursued him. The figure of Arnesson's patient. The still form of the white rat in the refrigerator. Father and son! Father and son! His mind echoed the impossible words in a dirge of horror.

In the morning he found the Norwegian had already prepared breakfast. As they were eating, he told Driscoll that the operation would take place that evening. His examination, he said, had shown that the white rat had fractured its skull in the leap from the precipice. Bits of bone had to be removed from the brain. Until this was done Driscoll could not attempt the revivification.

Refusing to enter into a discussion of technicalities, Arnesson gave the American a pamphlet describing the method they would follow. It was typewritten, and obviously but recently prepared. Driscoll spent the entire day in familiarizing himself with the directions, confined to his room.

As the hour for the operation drew closer a curious tension hovered over the place. The animals were unusually silent. Even the wind, which had howled mournfully all day, quieted to a mere whisper. The atmosphere was one of—waiting.

At dinner Arnesson seemed agitated and nervous, speaking in squeaky monosyllables, and then only when directly addressed. He had a book on the table beside him. At first Driscoll supposed it was a surgical tome. But as the Norwegian arose at the end of the meal he was

surprized to see that it was a copy of the Bible.

Precisely at nine o'clock the surgeon tapped at Driscoll's door. Under his arm was a white bundle which he tossed onto the bed.

"Your operating-gown," he said, eyeing the American keenly from behind his dark glasses. "Put it on and be in the surgery at exactly nine-thirty. Don't come in a minute before."

"Can't I help you with the preparations?" asked Driscoll.

"No. You do as you're told." Arnesson's voice was falsetto with harshness. "I've a lot on my mind and can't be bothered with inanities. My methods may seem strange to you, but they're *my* methods! Don't ask any questions during the operation. Above all, stay on your own side of the table and keep your hands away from mine. More than you know depends upon your following my orders implicitly."

Without another word, he left the room.

More than you know depends upon it! Driscoll could not forget those words as he dressed himself for the ordeal. Nor could he get out of his mind the picture of Arnesson's patient. *Its* life depended on their skill—on the Norwegian's genius as a surgeon and on Driscoll's ability to resurrect from death. No doubt the creature was in its room now, consumed in an agony of waiting. . . .

Before leaving his room Driscoll drank a stiff tot of whisky to strengthen his nerve. There must be no indecision-- no fainting like a nurse at her first appendectomy. He must enter the operating-room as a machine, not a man.

As he walked down the hall he drew on his rubber gloves, tightened the gauze mask about his face. Drawing a deep breath, he entered the surgery. It was exactly nine-thirty.

The weirdness of the spectacle almost unnerved him at once. The room was in total blackness save only for a spotlight that shone from the ceiling, its concentrated white ray focussed on the white flesh that lay rigidly on the table. The frozen rat was covered by a sheet that left only its head visible. In the brilliant light the features seemed to writhe in a sardonic smile, the wide-open but sightless eyes staring upward in a grotesque simulation of life.

On the other side of the operating-table, dim in the darkness except when his white tunic came under the cone of illumination, stood Arnesson. A white cap covered his head, the inevitable gauze mask swathed his lower features, and a pair of thick-lensed spectacles had supplanted the usual smoked glasses. His hands were rubber-sheathed talons as they rested on the enameled edge of the table. He looked like something from another dimension, and yet an air of confidence had replaced his late agitation.

Driscoll stepped across the floor, a little sickened by the carbolic vapors that seeped through his own mask. Sweat started out on his face. The tall figure opposite waved a gloved hand. A long finger indicated a wad of iodinized cotton. Mechanically, Driscoll reached toward a basin. The operation was under way.

For several moments the strange ritual proceeded without words. Distantly, came the hushed squealing of rats. Even more remote was the throb of the generator. Within the room the silence was broken only by the biting crunch of Arnesson's trephine. Driscoll's eyes dwelt with fascination on the Norwegian's fingers. They moved like streaks of light, cutting, probing, sewing. He was awed by this masterful display of surgery.

An hour passed swiftly, and still the silence was unbroken by a human voice.

Arnesson was breathing heavily, and there was a faint, charnel odor that usurped the ever-present smell of iodoform. Driscoll glanced hastily at the recumbent form on the table. That beast-smell! Was the warmth of the room——?

Shaking with fatigue, Arnesson emitted a sharp, rasping grunt. The younger man looked up swiftly, his eyes blurred by the alternate light and shadow as the surgeon moved about his task. There was something . . .

"Pay attention!" snapped the voice, hysterically sharp. "Sponge!"

Driscoll handed the sponge over in a sort of daze. He could not tear his eyes from the man opposite him. He stared at the extraordinary length of the body. He noticed suddenly how thin it was, how seemingly emaciated. Then his eyes fixed in the masked head—so much larger than the average head. He felt a little nauseated. That smell, as of an unclean animal, lingered in his nostrils.

"Ar—Arnesson!" he muttered.

"Scalpel!" snapped the voice. "Quick, you fool!" The tones were even more shrill than before.

Driscoll had a scalpel in his hand. But, his mind in a chaos, he was slow in extending it. The surgeon leaned over the table, reaching for it impatiently. His head came directly under the light. Driscoll gasped and stared hypnotically.

"Look out!" Arnesson's long arm shot out with his despairing scream.

Too late! Overcome by the sudden understanding of what he saw, Driscoll fell against the table. The knife in his nerveless hand slid like a plow into the white rat's naked brain.

For what seemed an eternity, both men stood stupefied. Then a low wail of frustration came from Arnesson. Tearing off the mask from his face, he picked up a heavy dissecting-knife. He raised it above his head in a claw-like hand and started for the American with deadly intent.

"You clumsy fool!" he squeaked shrilly. "I'll kill you for this!"

Driscoll backed away, retching violently. His hand tore frantically at his white tunic, found his coat pocket. The gun came up drunkenly, steadied. It spoke a single, concise syllable. The shot shattered Arnesson's glasses, tore through the bridge of his snout-like nose. He crashed heavily down across the body of the operating-table. The knife clattered to the floor.

Driscoll didn't faint. He was a man to whom work came first, and there was necessary work to be done. He put the gun in his pocket and walked out of the surgery. In the animal room, he opened all the cages. Very calmly, he shut off the generator, and by the aid of the flashlight got his suitcase. He found some kerosene in the laboratory.

As the horses pulled him away over the road that was "a frozen hell at night" a red glare lit the sky behind him. But it could not burn away the picture etched indelibly on his mind: the picture of a rat-like face staring with red-unseeing eyes at the hopeless ruin of its father.

"One with the tempests, the roaring ocean, and the swirling constellations."

A Thunder of Trumpets

By ROBERT E. HOWARD and
FRANK THURSTON TORBETT

A strange tale of India—Ranjit was young and handsome: then who was that incredibly aged and withered man that appeared before Bernice for one fleeting moment?

"She is fire in his blood, and a thunder of trumpets; her voice is beyond all music in his ears; and she can shake his soul that else stands stedfast in the drafty presence of the Titans of the Light and of the Dark."

—Jack London.

ALLAH might have sent the crash of thunder that startled Bernice Andover's horse into the wild bolt that unseated its rider; but surely Shaitan sent the tiger. No beast so old, foul-

smelling and depraved could possibly have any other than an infernal connection. So Bernice told herself as she sat up, still dizzy from her tumble into the cushioning bushes, and fascinatedly watched that snarling, striped, whiskered face emerging from the underbrush. She was not frightened, yet. Her wits were still a bit addled from the unexpected fall, when a low-hanging limb had brushed her out of the saddle. And her pampered, ultra-civilized reflexes, having never before encountered physical peril, were slow now in recognizing it as a fact.

She watched like a spectator at a play while the evil-smelling old scoundrel surveyed her with the suspicious caution of all cat-things, which she herself should have been able to understand. He was not an aristocrat of his kind. He was ancient, slouchy and disreputable. When he curled back his lip and snarled silently, gaps showed in the rows of his yellow fangs. And this, she realized in a detached sort of way, indicated her deadly peril. Only infirm and decrepit beasts ordinarily turned man-eater. A fine commentary on man's "dominion over the beasts of the field!" When a tiger sank so low in the social scale of his own kind that he was in danger of starvation, he turned to devouring those superior beings that claimed kinship to deity.

Now a big mangy paw came into sight, and next a moth-eaten pair of shoulders, too creaky with age to damage anything except a member of the dominant human race. Latent instincts in Bernice, submerged beneath many generations of artificial security and guaranteed protection, began to stir. This, she hurriedly told herself, could not really be happening to her! Tigers ate people only in books, and then only fat priests and ignorant peasants. It was ridiculous to suppose that *she,* or any other beautiful white woman, should go into the uneasy belly of such a thing as *that.* So her artificial reflexes told her, even while her naked, primitive instincts (which strikingly resembled a cave-woman with a leopard hide bound about her flanks) were shrieking of terror and despair and physical agony, and all the unpleasant, basic realities of the universe that civilized people try to submerge with silk frocks, philosophical theories and policemen.

This couldn't be happening to her! she cried out silently. This was jungle, true; but scarcely out of sight of the palace of Jhundra Singh, whose guests she and her party were. But plain common sense told her she might as well be a thousand leagues away from ballroom dresses, hot and cold running water, and soldiers with machine-guns. The jungle she had braved had engulfed her, and when they came looking for Bernice Andover, they would find only a heap of bones, with bits of raw flesh adhering to them—this thought was so revolting that she screamed, and screamed again.

The beast was sinking into a crouch, his wicked old eyes blazing with hunger and fear, strikingly like the expression of an old roué whose wife holds the purse-strings, when he sights a lovely young thing in petticoats. He knew he was violating a beastly taboo; had known it every time he struck down a human being. But necessity knows no law; the hunger of a starving tiger is as important to the tiger as the hunger which impels a striker to break a scab's head is to the striker. And like all forbidden fruit, human flesh produced a strange delirium of ecstasy, setting up wild vibrations in the shadowy thing that is a tiger's soul.

Her screams roused him to madness. His tail lashed the grasses, his stringy old muscles coiled; then, just as Bernice threw up her hands to shut out the sight of doom, she caught a flash of color out of the corner of her eye. That sense

which is politely called the feminine instinct told her it was a male human even before she got a good look at him.

The quick, harried glance showed her it was a tall man, apparently a native, clad in whites and a turban. Her heart sank as she saw he was apparently unarmed; though it must be admitted that this emotion was prompted by the fear that he would be unable to rescue her, rather than by the realization of the peril *he* was stepping into.

But he showed no sign of perturbation. His strong, dark face was tranquil, reflecting neither fear nor passion as he walked toward the crouching brute, which had checked its spring and now snarled up at him, whiskers quivering with outraged resentment. The man folded his arms, almost wearily, and stood looking down at the brute. And then a strange thing happened. Bernice felt a distinct vibration in the air, almost like a faint electric shock. The man had drawn no weapon. He had made no hostile move, but she saw a change steal into the great shining eyes of the crouching tiger. They glowed weirdly, then flared wide with the shadow of fear. And with a rustle of the tall grass, the beast was gone, sudden and silent as a shadow itself.

The man turned back to the girl, who scrambled up and faced him, instinctively brushing back her hair and arranging her riding-habit. He saw an image of loveliness as nearly perfect as natural beauty and all the artifices of feminine lore could make it, from her reddish-gold hair to her trim little feet in their soft riding-boots. His eyes were inscrutable as they dwelt on her, but in their dark depths a tiny flame seemed to flicker, faintly and momentarily, like the reflection of a long burnt-out fire.

He was tall, supplely built. His complexion was no darker than that of the average Anglo-Indian, his features distinctly Aryan. His face held her fascinated gaze; it might have been a mask carved from bronze, so powerful were its lines, had it not been for the intense virility and vitality which animated it. Its reflected strength, faced squarely, was almost like a physical impact—stimulating in its effect. As their eyes met, Bernice felt her heart pound suddenly and briefly, not from fright, but as if from some exciting anticipation felt by her subconscious instincts but not recognized by her consciousness. For a fleeting instant she felt naked under that impersonal gaze, as if casually and impassively he had denuded her with one glance, not only of body but of soul as well. Then the sensation passed so swiftly she all but forgot it.

All these feelings and sensations fleeted through her mind during the brief seconds in which she was rising and facing him. Then reaction swept over her. The glade swam giddily to her gaze and she staggered. In an instant of blindness she felt a strong arm about her, steadying her, and with the contact a powerful surge of vitality seemed to flow into her body. It was like contact with a living dynamo. Fully poised again, though tingling from that contact, she lifted her head, and instantly the man released her and drew back.

"Thank you," she murmured. "I'm all right. It was just the fright and excitement. I guess I fainted."

"Come," he said in a voice as soothing as the mellow chime of a temple bell. His English had no trace of an accent. "I'll take you back to the palace."

"But I haven't thanked you——"

"Please don't."

She found herself walking along at his side, hardly knowing how she got there. He moved with an effortless ease that reminded her of the beast he had driven away. They walked a while in silence.

The need of words, the usual conventional trivialities, did not occur to her. She felt a blissful sensation of utter security that she did not try to explain. But presently she said: "What did you do to the tiger?"

"Nothing." He glanced down at her from his greater height. "I only let him look into my eyes and see himself in the mirror of reality. The sight terrified him, made him forget even his hunger, poor devil! He ran away to forget the revelation of his own reality."

"You're making fun of me!" she protested bewilderedly.

He shook his head without mockery.

"How many of us human animals could endure the sight of our own selves, stripped of the garments of illusion with which we cloak them? In our infancy others begin to garb us in conventional illusions to spare their own sight, and later we ourselves continue the process—we carefully deck ourselves out in elaborate regalia of pretense to hide the raw nakedness of our souls, not only from others, but from ourselves as well. We hate most those who strip us bare—and their motive is generally one of self-protection, as a man points out deformities in others to draw attention away from his own defects."

There was nothing pedantic or pompous, nothing self-complacent or rhetorical in his tone; it was, indeed, almost as if he were musing aloud.

"I don't see what a tiger——" she began, and for the first time he smiled, and in that powerful face his smile was a marvel of gentleness.

"Truly, we humans fancy ourselves alone not only in virtues but in faults likewise. But I think your horse is coming to meet us."

She glanced at him, startled, but the next instant saw the high-strung beast coming toward them through the trees, his head lowered as if in contrition. He rolled his eyes toward ther, then nuzzled the man and whinnied softly.

The man smiled, caressed the moist muzzle, and then lifted Bernice into the saddle, with a lack of effort that caught her breath. She was scarcely aware of his hands upon her; she went up like a feather wafted in the wind. She gathered the reins in her hands and looked down at him. This was a veritable adventure out of the *Arabian Nights*, with a handsome magician from whom tigers fled and to whom runaway steeds returned in obedience to a silent command. It was fantastic and ridiculous—yet this was India, the ancient and mysterious, where anything might happen. She refused to be swayed by Western skepticism; this was her adventure, and she meant to extract the last least thrill from it.

"Who are you?" she asked abruptly.

"Call me Ranjit."

"I am Bernice Andover of New York. I came to Sawlpore with my Aunt Cecelia and my fiancé, Sir Hugh Bradberry. We're guests of Jhundra Singh. I must go back to the palace at once. Sir Hugh and my aunt will be worried about me. He told me not to ride away from the palace alone, but I disobeyed him."

"Naturally!" he smiled.

"Of course! But it's lucky, isn't it? For if I hadn't disobeyed, we'd never have met, and I wouldn't have had the most thrilling adventure of my life!"

She regretted it the instant she said it—the silly, conventional, artificial thing—how cheap it sounded! She turned her head quickly to hide a flush, and then said: "Won't you return to the palace with me?"

"I'll walk beside you until we meet your friends," he answered.

"Are you afoot?"

"What right have I to impose my weight on the back of a living creature?"

"Man was given dominion over the beasts of the field——" she began hazily.

"Why did you not tell the tiger that?" he asked, smiling.

"I couldn't speak his language," she retorted, and he laughed as he swung in beside her with his long smooth stride that was a beauty to behold in the rhythm of motion.

THE brief jungle shower, short and stormy as a woman's temper, had passed over, leaving only a spattering of great rain-drops glistening on the broad green leaves. Through the dusky emerald arches the blue sky shone, clean and clear and tranquil. Dim, untamed emotions stirred in Bernice, like the memories of shameless pagan worship; in such dim leafy aisles as these, in the blue-black shadows, the first gods of men were born. She glanced at the man striding beside her; he might have been a high priest of some primeval forest god. Was there something of the lawless pagan in him? Yes — but something more: something not outside, but above the Law; something firm and immovable, yet not hard or callous. She recalled the strange tales she had heard of Hindoo holy men—men who dwelt in jungle places and had strange powers over wild beasts. She had imagined them as wild, unkempt prophets, flame-eyed and matted-haired and naked—not like this young god.

"I have not seen you at the palace or in the village," she said. "Do you live near by?"

"Not far away," he answered. "But here comes Sir Hugh looking for you."

She saw the party an instant later—Sir Hugh, a tall, long-legged Englishman whose bony dependable face was now creased with worry, and several stately native officers of Jhundra Singh's court. They saw her, and Sir Hugh shouted and came galloping toward her; she felt a warm little glow under her heart as she saw the worry erased from his face by a glad light. But she knew exactly what he'd say and do.

"Jove, I'm glad you're safe!" Sir Hugh exclaimed—exactly as she had known he would. And he caught her hands with an eager, awkward tenderness, and then let go of them as if fearful of hurting her. Mentally she sighed, wishing he had shown some of the emotion she knew he felt—such as grabbing her and crushing her in a spasm of relief, and then shaking her for riding off alone. But his reproof was limited to a gentle: "Really, old girl, you shouldn't go running about like this alone, you know."

"You might have had cause for worry, if it hadn't been for this gentleman——" she began, turning, then stopped. Ranjit was nowhere in sight. "Where is he?" she cried.

"Who?"

"The—the man! Ranjit! The man who saved me from the tiger!"

"Tiger!" Sir Hugh convulsively loosened his collar. "My word! You don't mean to tell me——"

"Yes, a man-eater! My horse ran away and threw me off, and the tiger came, and then Ranjit came—and drove him off," she concluded lamely, realizing how fantastic it would sound to say: "He looked the tiger in the eye, and the tiger pulled his foot!"

"By Jove, that was sporting of him!" quoth Sir Hugh. "I must find him and thank him."

"Yes, of course! But let's go on to the palace now. Aunt Cecelia will be worried."

Bernice had an idea that no one would find Ranjit if Ranjit did not wish to be found, and this seemed to be one of the times. Besides, she had a strange reluctance for sharing him with Sir Hugh; she

was like a child clinging selfishly to the possession of a glorious secret.

THE native gentlemen came up, with many speeches of congratulation, respectful and beautifully enunciated, and then they all rode back to the palace where Aunt Cecelia would be waiting and provide the scolding, but it would merely be boresome, coming from her. Bernice sighed, realizing that Sir Hugh would never bully her, even after they were married—if they ever were. She caught herself up with a jerk and glanced at the beautifully groomed native officers who rode so magnificently on each side of her. They were men, but to her they must be merely stuffed uniforms, for ever presenting only the formal stiff-starch side of their personalities to her. There was fire and spirit in them all, under the gold braid and polish, but, she knew with a sigh, she'd never see it. The British had taught natives how to treat white women—dammit! A delicious little thrill ran through her at the thought of Ranjit; it was with a start that she realized that he would be considered a native by Sir Hugh and Aunt Cecelia. She rebelled at the implication; Ranjit could not be classified according to rote and rule—he was Ranjit.

So they came back primly and respectably to the great rambling palace on the hill with its towers rising amidst the sprawling luxuriance of the flaming gardens that overlooked the green foamy ocean of jungle on all sides except one. That was the side toward the squalid village. Bernice felt as never before the artificialities of her existence; the pleasant lies built about the gardens of her soul and her beauty to keep out the jungle—or to keep her out of the jungle, which? Suddenly she wanted to cry out to Sir Hugh: "For God's sake if you want me as badly as you say you do, snatch me up and ride away into the green wilderness with me, and conventions be damned!" She said: "It was so nice of you to come looking for me, Hugh!"

"Could I have done anything else?" he asked with a humbleness that made her want to kick his shins. And then they were at the palace court, and Aunt Cecelia was there, a tall, stately woman, with finely chiseled aristocratic features, beautiful and passionless as those of a classical statue, and the poise attained by forty years of repressing and denying the natural instincts—required by position in society.

Even Jhundra Singh roused himself out of his maze of worries and perplexities to express vague satisfaction for her safe return — a small, pot-bellied man with pouches under his eyes, and nervous hands. He had been educated in England, and he hated his principality and all the people in it, the priests who wined and bullied by turns, the people who cheered him one day and cursed him the next, and the Government which alternately stroked his back with the steel hand in the velvet glove, and, when he wanted to do something merely because he wanted to do it, doubled that hand into an enormous fist which it waggled politely but definitely under his shrinking nose. Just now he wanted to get hold of enough money to forget his frustrations in a prolonged spree in Paris; Sir Hugh offered him the means, as payment for oil concessions to be granted to Sir Hugh's company—the mission that had brought the Englishman to Sawlpore. He lusted for the lucre Sir Hugh dangled before him; but the Government approved the concessions, and that made him suspicious. And there were other factors. Already a delegation of Muhammadans had waited on him to protest the invasion of the infidels—as they always protested about everything, particularly when it was none of their business. And the Hindoo priests

had their oar in, too; seeing no chance of getting a slice of the melon themselves, they objected on religious grounds.

Bernice spoke of the tiger, and Jhundra Singh hoped it would eat the high priest. She spoke of her benefactor.

"A tall, handsome, well-built man in a white European suit and a turban——" she began.

"Ranjit Bhatarka," he said. "A Yogi! So the people call him. With a Muhammadan turban! But he wears what he wishes, does what he pleases. How fortunate some men are! He is above caste. The Hindoos think he is a holy man and fear him. Even the Muhammadans concede his holiness, and fear him even more. I don't like him myself. He looks right through you——"

"Perhaps he could persuade the priests that it's all right for me to have those oil concessions," suggested Sir Hugh.

Bernice mentally planted a trim boot in the seat of his riding-breeches. A Yogi wangling an oil lease! Ye gods! And they called Americans materialistic!

"He wouldn't do it," snarled the prince. "Never interferes in anything. I'm surprized he didn't let the tiger eat the *memsahib* and call it *Karma*. He's the sort of a damned——"

"Well?" inquired Sir Hugh.

"Nothing," muttered Jhundra Singh, sneaking a wary look around. "The fellow has uncanny powers. Animals obey him. The natives say he's hundreds of years old. They say he can read people's minds. I don't want to offend him."

EVEN as she smiled at the natives' superstition, Bernice's feminine vanity fixed itself on what Jhundra said about Ranjit's not interfering in human affairs, ordinarily. That meant that in Ranjit's sight she was not ordinary. Looking out the palace window that night into a garden turned black and silver by the moonlight, she gave herself over to exotic fancies in which Ranjit moved mistily but definitely. Once she thought she saw him looking over the wall toward her window, but the next instant the figure resolved itself into a shadow cast by a palm tree whose fronds quivered in the slight breeze.

Then she sank into sleep, and presently she dreamed. She saw herself kneeling on a shining floor of many-colored mosaics, carefully building toy houses, such as children build, out of gleaming ivory blocks. Ranjit stood above her with his arms folded and a smile on his dark face; the smile was neither scornful nor cynical, but gentle, kindly, perhaps a little sad. She knelt, looking at him, and her toy houses toppled to the floor in gleaming ruin, but she still clung to the smooth cubes in her hands. Ranjit's smile wavered; in a sort of horror she saw uncertainty and weakness pass like a shadow across that face that had seemed strong as carven bronze. But in that instant a burst of blinding light enveloped all so she could see no more, and she could only hear a sound like a child crying and it was her own voice. It was at that instant that she woke.

It was full day. The dreaming stillness of Indian morning wrapped the world. She lay there for a moment, feeling like one newly born. The uncertain tag ends of thoughts and surmises drew together, merged and crystallized. Fears and doubts left her, and an understanding of her desire hung like a nebulous crystal ball before her. Without calling her maid, she rose, dressed and went out into the garden, straight toward the spot where she had thought to see Ranjit the night before. There was a little gate there, which fastened with a bronze dragon claw. She opened it and went out into the dew-blazing glory of the forest. She felt no surprize when she saw Ranjit

standing there smiling, with his arms folded.

"I hoped you would come," he said simply.

"I knew you would come," she answered.

Without another word they turned and walked into the forest.

"Sir Hugh wishes to meet and thank you," she said.

"He has already," he answered. "We met last night, near the village. He has given his permission for me to show you the places of interest in the vicinity."

"I am afraid his affairs are not going well at present," she murmured absently. Sir Hugh seemed part of an old life, separated from this new life by the immeasurable gulf of a single night; everything seemed to assume new proportions this flaming morning. It did not seem strange to her that she should be walking through the forest before breakfast with a man the natives called a Yogi.

That day was the beginning of many days; in later years when Bernice tried to recall them in detail, those details merged obscurely; the memory of those days became a drifting, many-colored haze in which nothing stood out clearly except Ranjit's strong face, looming like a carven god above a morning mist, and the ocean-like intonations of his deep, bell-like voice.

There were long walks in the forest, when they strolled side by side, and she never grew weary, as if some of his incredible strength was transmitted to her; rides—at least she rode, while he swung along beside her, with the effortless ease of a great cat. And all the while the mellow waves of his golden voice beat on her consciousness, tranquil, gigantic, all but engulfing, like waves out of a sea beyond her ken. The imagery of his speech, the strange wisdom of his words, the cosmic import of his sayings, these things faded the instant she had left him, became dim and often inexplicable, as if her consciousness were too feeble to retain their lasting impression. But the quality of his tones remained, resounding in her ears when she was alone, or even when listening to the trivial prattle of others; reverberating through her dreams. His voice was less like a human voice than an emanation of power, a surge and flow from some colossal source beyond the scope of her comprehension.

She remembered little of their actual conversation. While she was with him she understood; each word, each phrase, each sentence stood out clean-cut and distinct, diamond-clear and bright. Through his eyes she saw the world anew, from the grass blade glistening in the morning dew to the golden face of the full moon thrusting up through a sheath of silvery mist. Deep in the jungle, where creepers hung from the arching branches like green pythons, he showed her ruins of cities that were old when Rome was young: broken domes thrusting up through the trees, cracked pavings half hidden in the jungle grasses, crumbling walls that were once battlemented ramparts that housed the treasures of kings. Under the witchery of his magic words she saw the glorious, glamorous, tragic and terrible pageant of the past move before her in living colors. She sensed the unfolding of mysteries and secrets, vaguely realized that she was hearing and seeing things that the historians of the world would give years off their lives to learn. But when she was alone the vivid color of his words slipped from her, merging in a vague, many-colored mist; only the golden resonance of his voice filled her ears, like the echo of the sea heard in a sea-shell.

Once she saw him lift a living cobra from a ruined wall with his naked hand and place it gently among the bushes,

and it did not seem strange to her that the reptile did not harm him.

The ordinary people about her seemed unreal, though. Their speech sounded hollow, their actions were meaningless. They seemed blind to the change in her; blind to the fact that Ranjit was the cause of this change. Sir Hugh, struggling with business difficulties, saw no more than the others. Vaguely he knew that Ranjit was "showing Bernice about" a great deal. That there might be anything between them more than respectful courtesy on one side and impersonal courtesy on the other, never occurred to him. Aunt Cecelia, so wise in her own plane, sensed nothing; caught like a beast in the cage of inhibitions, beliefs and conventions pertaining to her place in the scheme of life, she was unable to see anything above or below her own level.

IN AFTER years memory of the hours spent with Ranjit merged into a myriad-colored shimmering of glory. But now those hours were the only realities in a dimming world.

She sensed its dimming. She sensed the opening of gates into a world whose very existence she had not guessed. She sensed that the man beside her moved on heights far above her; blindly she groped to stand beside him, and she felt his power lifting and guiding her, but each time she felt herself sink back again to the commonplace. The sensation of rising was not altogether pleasant; it was like being torn from a petty but safe refuge and hurled naked into a dizzy cosmos where titanic winds roared and thundered.

Stand up naked in the storm! he seemed to say. Shake back your mane and face the thunders and the giant winds that roar between the worlds. Face the rush of events, the gigantic Truths, the dizzying realities. Be one with the tempests, the roaring ocean, and the swirling constellations. His hand was on her wrist, guiding and sustaining, but she felt her path as swaying and uncertain as a bridge suspended from star to star in the roaring, cloudy gulfs.

This was only one, and that the most disturbing side of their relationship. These things she felt vaguely, sensed rather than thought, as one senses the thunder of the surf before it is seen or really heard. For the most part, she saw Ranjit as a virile and romantic figure, godlike in beauty and certitude, who roused all the basic feminine in her.

Their relationship was mental only; he had never so much as kissed her. Yet she felt at times as if he had enveloped her whole being, incorporated her into his own personality; she felt herself wavering on the verge of a surrender so complete it terrified her. And at such times she sensed a deliberate curbing of his power, as a strong but gallant fighter curbs his strength lest it overwhelm a weaker antagonist.

Absorbed in him, she paid little attention to what went on about her. With others she smiled, voiced the conventional trivialities, and mechanically played the part she had always played. Sir Hugh did not sense that she was daily drawing away from him. A bit obtuse, as Anglo-Saxons are likely to be in matters not concerning business, he did not notice her abstraction. He had other things to worry him, and with an Englishman or American, business must always come before love. He seemed no nearer the possession of those concessions than he was at first. The deviousness of Jhundra Singh maddened him, though he practised the iron control and patience of the true Englishman. He did not realize that Jhundra Singh was as helpless as himself. The prince could no more come out squarely on the issue—any issue—than he could fly. He veered and shifted like a weather

vane, taking one stand one day and its opposite the next, but he did so only because he had to. A thousand generations of shifty and subtle sires held him in a grip of heredity as unyielding as an iron cage. Of necessity he approached his goal obliquely, and through a maze of blind alleys, detours and meanderings that made Sir Hugh clench his fists in his fight against the insane desire to kill the man.

And the prince had his troubles. Fear and greed all but tore him asunder; fear that Sir Hugh might lose patience and withdraw his offer; fear that he, Jhundra Singh, might give way too soon, before Sir Hugh had reached the limit of what he was able and willing to pay.

The priests opposed the granting of the concessions. He suspected business interests rival to Sir Hugh's company were bribing them. He threw this accusation in their faces and they stood on their bitter dignity and spoke to him sternly about sacrilege and the wrath of the gods until he wept with fury and chewed the cushions of his royal divan. He did not believe in the gods, but he feared them. The priests harangued the common man at length, and the common man listened without comprehension and with much pious passion. Conch shells blared in the temples and natives gathered on the streets in impassioned groups. Hindoos and Muhammadans broke each others' heads without rime or reason, but with passionate zeal.

It was on the very day when the prince, greed defeating fear at last, summoned Sir Hugh to a hasty audience, that Ranjit said to Bernice: "We can go no further in this manner."

They were standing within the fringe of the jungle; there was a scent of spices on the soft vagrant breeze. In later years that scent was to recur to Bernice in strange places, bringing with it a blind, aching wistfulness.

"What do you mean?" She knew what he meant; he knew she knew.

"I am in love with you," he said, his voice vibrant with a strange awe. "It is amazing—inexplicable—but it is so."

"Is it so amazing that anyone should fall in love with me?" she asked.

"Amazing that I should fall in love with anyone. I thought that was a madness I had left in the lowlands of development, generations ago."

"Generations?" She stared at him, startled. "What do you mean by that?"

He had been about to speak, but now he paused at the questioning, disturbed look in her eyes. For a long minute he studied her, and he shook his head.

"No matter. Let it pass."

"I wish you wouldn't say things like that," she said, almost petulantly. "There are times when something you say almost frightens me—it is almost like a window opening unexpectedly and giving me a brief terrified glance into a terrible cosmos I did not suspect. For an instant you are like a stranger—a terrible, unhuman stranger; then——"

"Then what?" There was something like pain in his fine eyes.

But she shook her head; already the sensation prompting her words was fading.

"Then you are just Ranjit—warm, and human and strong—so strong!"

"Perhaps this is *Karma*," he said presently, as if speaking his thoughts aloud. "Or perhaps in my blind selfishness I lie to myself, telling myself it is *Karma*—when it is only my own desire. I do not know. Is this phenomenon a signal that I have failed of reaching those heights for which I have struggled so long? Is it destined that I should so fail? Shall I accept defeat, or resist it? If this were *Karma* should I not recognize it? But I

am all at sea. I am sure neither of myself nor of anything in the universe."

"I don't understand!" She might have been a child, groping blindly in the dark. "I love you! I want you! Neither race nor creed matters! I want to go with you —live with you in a cave on bread and water, if need be! I need you! You have become necessary to me!"

"And is it *Karma,* or a condition I have myself created?" he wondered. "I have desired you from the moment I saw you—I, who have known thousands of beautiful women, in a hundred different lands. I fought it—resisted it—yet have succumbed at last. I have betrayed my teachings; have used what you might call magic to summon you to me, to blind the eyes of your people lest they sense your drifting from them. No, I must not think of what might or might not be. I love you. Not for that alone would I renounce the road in which I have set my feet; but you say you love me—that you need me. If it be the duty of a man to sacrifice his body to aid the weaker, how much more is it his duty to renounce Nirvana when this renunciation is his obligation!"

"You would take me because you feel it is your obligation?" she whispered, dry-lipped.

"No! No!" Suddenly she was in his arms, and the terrific impact of his magnetic vitality almost overcame her. "No! The gods help me! I want you! It is madness—it is insanity! But it is true. I am too selfish to let you go, for my sake or for yours. You cannot go my way—it would be senseless cruelty to expect it —but I will go yours. I'll renounce my hopes of treading those heights I have glimpsed afar—the dreams and struggles of gener—of many years. I'll sink down to the mediocre level of the trivial and the commonplace; but I must know that it is I, the man, whom you love, not the glamor of mystery and romance that fools have thrown about me, and that I—God help me!—have deliberately worn for your sake."

"I love you!" she whispered, her head swimming. "No one but you! Only you!"

For an instant he held her, while the world ceased to be around her; then he released her, steadying her with his arm as she reeled, and then stepped back.

"Have you told Sir Hugh?"

She shook her head, unable to speak.

"We must tell him, at once. Absolute truth with others, and with ourselves, must be the foundation of our relationship. My head is in the dust with my guilt and shame. I have not practised absolute truth in my dealings with you, either with you, or with him. I should have warned him. I should have told you of my desire at the very beginning, instead of trying to lift you to the level I thought I trod—conceited fool that I was! It was foolish and arrogant and cruel of me. So little have I learned through all these long, bitter years——"

She shivered, without knowing why, feeling as if a chill wind had blown upon her out of the spatial gulfs. She groped childishly for his hand; he took her hand tenderly and looked at her with a strange compassion. She bowed her head, feeling weak and futile and near to tears, despite the soothing grasp of his strong fingers.

"Come," he said gently, turning toward the little gate.

In silence they entered the garden; they had not gone a dozen paces when they saw Sir Hugh, coming toward them in long strides. He shouted: "Bernice!"

The next instant he had reached them and his long face lighted.

"Jhundra Singh has just signed the concessions! Success! I've accomplished my first big job—why, Bernice, what's the matter?"

Unanalytical as he was, her expression

checked his jubilance, set him staring puzzledly.

"Hugh, I must speak to you," she said, and on an impulse added: "Ranjit, will you please leave us alone for a little?"

He bowed and moved away, disappearing behind a clump of bushes. She turned to the Englishman, and drew a deep breath, finding her task a thousand times more distasteful than she had dreamed it would be.

"Hugh, I——"

"Listen!"

They both whirled about as a rising clamor of frenzied humanity rose on the air.

THEY never learned just who started the riot—chagrined business rivals, angry priests or mischievous Muhammadans. But anyway, there they came, pelting up the dusty street from the village, three or four hundred of them, howling rabble, brandishing clubs and blades and shrieking: "Slay the foreigners!"

It was a nasty little riot, leaderless, abortive, without plan; but men can die as dead in a small riot as in a world war. Most of them rushed toward the main gate that led into the palace courtyard, where they were promptly shot and bayonetted by the prince's Sikh guardsmen. There was a short, brief mêlée, bloody and rather horrible, with the casualties all on one side, and then the survivors broke and fled back toward the village howling lamentably, and leaving a dozen or more figures sprawled in the dust before the gate. Some were quite still and some writhed and shrieked.

But in the first rush a part of the mob had turned aside and run into the garden through the little gate before it could be closed. Sir Hugh, interposing his long frame between them and Bernice, was struck by a thrown cudgel and fell senseless and bleeding on a carpet of crushed blossoms. Bernice screamed as a simitar with a gleaming razor-edge was lifted—then Ranjit appeared from nowhere in particular. Bernice distinctly saw him catch the sweeping blade in his naked hand. No blood spurted, no cut showed on his flesh.

The man who had struck the blow cowered back, releasing the weapon. Ranjit tossed it over the wall and faced the mob with his arms folded. He said nothing. His eyes were brooding, passionate. But a low whimper rose from the crowd and the loose ranks wavered like grain before a wind. Bernice felt the impact of a terrific power, as a man might feel the stir of a great wind, even when it was blowing away from him. She sensed that a terrific psychic force was emanating from Ranjit, akin perhaps to hypnotism yet vastly mightier, smiting the rioters with a mental and physical impact that was overpowering. They cringed back—suddenly they turned and fled screaming. And the shadow of a great fear filled Bernice's soul as she saw Ranjit standing there somber and aloof, looking less like a human being than she had dreamed a man could look. It was not fear of him. But in a blinding, paralyzing, abasing wave of absolute realization she knew that he was above and beyond her so far that they could never meet on any plane but the physical. No more could she stand naked and upright and blind, with the great cosmic winds lashing her; a veil was torn back revealing the flesh she had thought was psychic fire—her own flesh, with its limitations she could never overcome.

Hugh at her feet was suddenly an anchor to grip her fast to the shores of the humanity she knew. She dropped to her knees, clutching him and sobbing. And had she looked up she would have

seen Ranjit standing over her with a shadow of weakness on his face that was more terrible than the grimness that had shown there as he faced the mob. Then it faded and the old, tender smile that seemed to encompass all frail humanity came back.

She felt herself drawn gently aside as Ranjit knelt and pressed the edges of Sir Hugh's wound together with his finger tips. The bleeding ceased instantly, and Ranjit tore a strip of clean cloth from his own garments and bandaged the senseless man's head with swift sure fingers.

Servants were hurrying from the palace; Aunt Cecelia, her poise for once forgotten, shattered by the awful, unfamiliar crashing of musketry, the howling of dying men and the raw smell of blood, was screaming hysterically for her niece. She screamed even more loudly when she saw the servants carrying Sir Hugh toward the palace.

BERNICE was following them in, when Ranjit gently drew her back. They stood alone among the shrubs.

"You love him," said Ranjit gently.

"I don't know!" she wailed. "No! No! I love you—but——"

"He is your kind; I am not," said Ranjit slowly. "Our love was madness, born of my selfish desire. I to whom Truth was All, betrayed my own creed. I have dazzled you with a false glamor which even now clouds your reason and makes any decision cruelly hard.

"You must see me as I really am, stripped of the cloak of illusion. I have seen you shudder when I spoke of my years on the Path. You must know the truth. I know your Western world does not understand or believe the science it calls Yogi philosophy. I cannot make you understand — cannot tell you in a moment what it has taken me a thousand years to learn—cannot tell you what are the compensations of renunciation. But life that stretches almost into immortality is one.

"I am neither young nor handsome. I am old—so very old you would not believe me if I told you. But it is given to the Treaders of the Path to veil the reality of their appearances so that they shall not give offense to others. For an instant I shall lift that veil. Look!"

His command was sharp and sudden, almost like a brutal blow. And Bernice cried out in fright and revulsion. Before her there stood no longer a young man, but an old, withered, toothless, bald, stooped creature that seemed scarcely human. His face was creased by a network of wrinkles, his skin was like leather. As she shrank back, shivering with disgust, she saw those wrinkles slowly fade and vanish; the figure straightened, expanded. Ranjit stood smiling sadly before her, but she shuddered as she traced faintly in his virile features lines she had seen in the ancient's countenance.

She did not speak; there was no need; the heights she had glimpsed, vague and shining, vanished for ever. Whimpering, she bowed her head in her hands. When she looked up, Ranjit was gone, and a strange breeze whispered through the forest. She turned and entered the palace where Sir Hugh waited.

The Mandarin's Canaries

By ROBERT BLOCH

A grim and fascinating tale of a torture-mad Chinese ruler who fed strange food to the feathered songsters in his garden of horror

THERE was revelry in the garden of the Mandarin Quong; revelry as attested by the loud cries and supplications for mercy interspersed with high titterings of pleasure.

The Mandarin was amusing himself today in a new fashion. Through the bamboos it could be seen that the stakes were bare, their rusty iron shackles hanging empty in the sunlight. The lotus-blossoms and orchids swayed with the wind to reveal that the racks stretched along the garden-paths were likewise empty, and the iron beds beneath the vines untenanted. No whips lay amidst the grass and flowers, no pincers or knives or barbed flails.

Therefore, as the cries and laughter proclaimed, the Mandarin Quong had found some new sport here in the Garden of Pain.

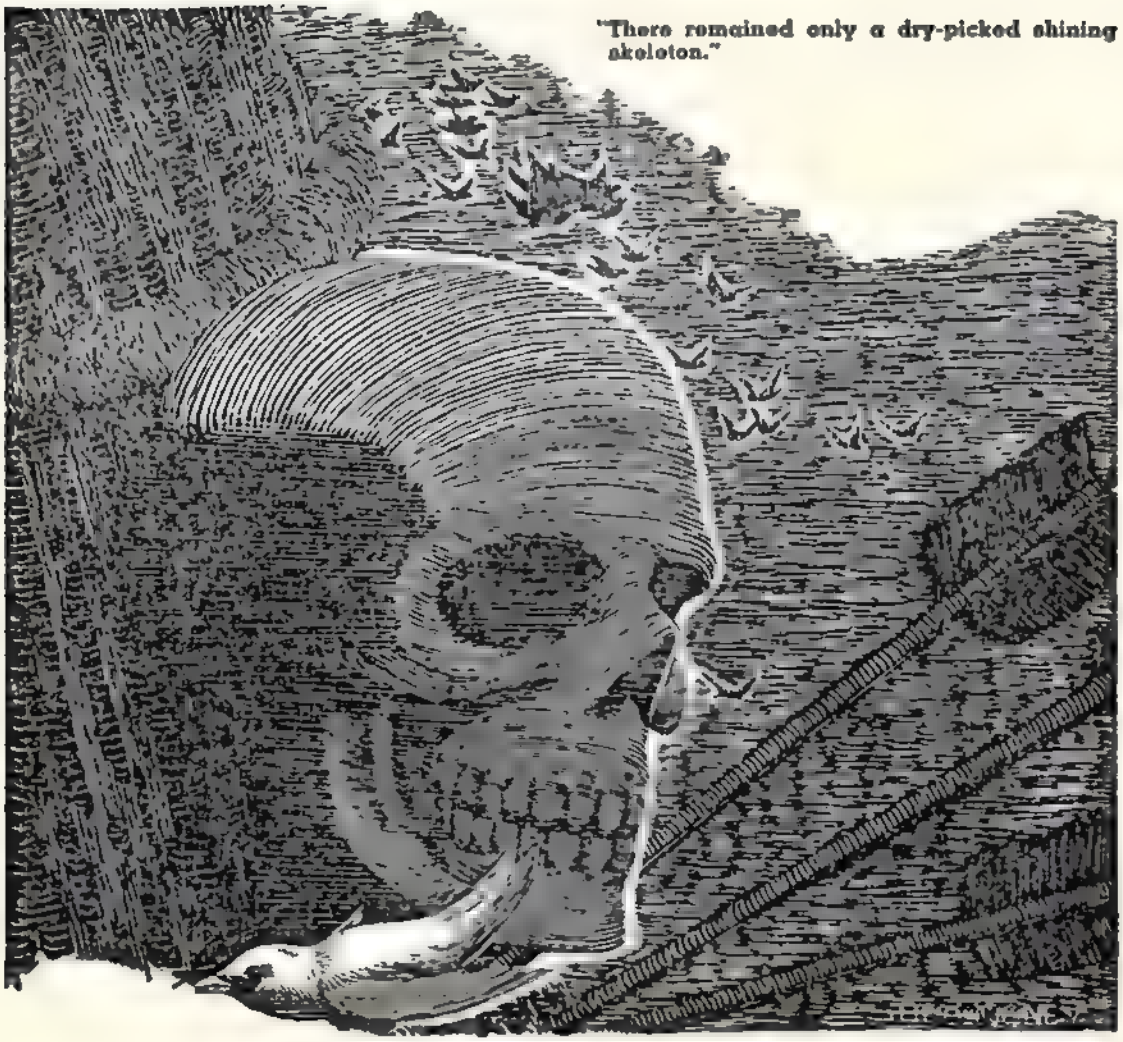
In a remote bower, guarded by great trees whose limbs had been trained to twist in torment, and veiled by serpentine creepers that extended fangs of scarlet blossom, the Mandarin stood. There had been those who were kind enough to compare Quong to the Lord Buddha, and there were times when his fat little figure held a dignified serenity quite similar.

But in moments such as this, Quong was transfigured; his fleshy face creased into a mask of demoniac mirth; his red, full lips writhed back above his black beard, and his eyebrows were swords over slitted points of flame. Pleasure was an intense emotion in the Mandarin, and his pleasure was Pain.

He stood staring across the bower at the two figures before him: the bound man against the great tree, and the robed figure confronting him some ten paces distant. The bound man was uttering the cries and the pleadings; the robed one was silent. He moved, but no sound emanated from those movements save an occasional twanging thrum. For the robed man held in his hands a great crossbow, and upon his back was a quiver bristling with barbed arrows. These he was swiftly and efficiently removing one by one; fitting them to his bow and taking expert aim as he released them at the bound, writhing figure of the captive.

His aim was remarkable—despite the agonized movements and convulsive startings of the victim, he never erred. The arrows sped to a living mark: the wrist, the ankle, the knee, the groin. With curious precision, he avoided placing the cruel shafts in a vital spot, and his arm carefully judged the depth with which each arrow would penetrate the shrinking yellow flesh of his tormented target.

But Quong did not notice this dexterity, or if he noticed it he gave the matter no heed. His laughing eyes were on the victim, watching the impact of each arrow, the jerk of the flesh as it sank in, and the thin trickle of blood that followed the piercing. To an observer it might almost be said that Quong ap-



"There remained only a dry-picked shining skeleton."

peared to be studying his victim's pain, studying with the amused and detached pleasure of a bibliophile who reads for the hundredth time some treasured volume—foretasting each delight, yet seeking unfelt nuances of enjoyment.

His delighted laughter fell as an arrow struck the bound man's left eye and penetrated the brain. The writhing ceased, the body sagged limply and hung from the ropes which restrained its fall.

The Mandarin Quong heaved a sigh—the sigh of the bibliophile when his book is closed—and with a wave of his saffron hands dismissed the archer. The bowman bowed and backed from the bower with gestures of obeisance, leaving his master alone.

QUONG stood stock-still for an instant after the fellow's departure, and his features underwent a curious change. Gone was the sadist's smile, gone the passionate intensity which had made of his face a gargoyle's grimace. Serenity returned to shine from his slant eyes, and his lips relaxed into a softer smile of pleasure. He moved forward to the tree where the bound body hung, passing the gory thing without so much as a glance.

Behind the tree, suspended by the selfsame ropes which upheld the victim, a series of thin metal pipes were hanging. From the sleeve of his robe the Mandarin drew forth a slender stick. With a gentle, caressing motion he drew the ivory head of the stick across the metal.. A chiming rang forth—a soft, liquid, almost chirping series of notes holding a peculiar bird-like quality. The tones flooded forth, clear and mellow, as the Mandarin chose his notes with careful attention to harmonics. Music came from the tree where horror hung.

Again the Mandarin stepped back, and stood still as though waiting. And suddenly, while the last strains of metallic melody still floated through the garden, the air was filled with a curious rustling sound—hundreds of tiny sounds, rather, blurred into a single whirring note. And there came a cheeping and shrill whistling from all around which caused the yellow face of Quong to glow with kindly pleasure.

Without warning, the air turned to gold. A thousand yellow forms swirled to outshine the sun—moving yellow dots with bejeweled eyes that flamed. They whirled and dipped against the serene sky, then swooped about the tree in a golden cloud that spun round and round about the trunk and its grisly adornment.

And still they came, whirring and scudding down until the tree was covered with a yellow blossoming in all its boughs, and vines of living gold crawled across the bark and what sagged against it. The garden was filled with tiny birds, filled with the exquisite darting flight of graceful elfin swarms that chirped liquid cries of pleasure.

The Mandarin watched the golden pageant flow over the tree-trunk, watched the shining cluster as it moved across the tree in frantic life. The symphony of this motion enthralled him so that the minutes passed unheeded.

It was perhaps half an hour later that the swarm dispersed. It rose suddenly in a golden spiral, swerving up from the tree-trunk to settle in the limbs. And now, in the space made vacant by the canaries' departure, a silver figure gleamed in the sunlight. Where the dead man had hung there remained only a dry-picked, shining skeleton.

The Mandarin stared quietly, then lifted his eyes to the boughs where the yellow horde rested in its repletion. He waited, and in a moment the melody came forth.

The song of pleasure was indescribable in its sweetness—soft, limpid, yet glowing with tonal color and pulsing with painfully ecstatic threnody. It rose and fell, faintly at first, then culminated in a burst of beauty as the chirping resolved into eery notes that were shrill yet vibrant.

For perhaps ten minutes the song continued, and then the last trills died away, the golden chain shattered link by link, and the birds departed.

Quong turned away toward the oncoming twilight, and as he walked toward the Palace the dusk hid the tears that streamed down his yellow cheeks.

2

THE Mandarin Quong loved his birds. This was a matter of common knowledge throughout the South, and the statement of it was generally coupled with the other known fact that Quong loved nothing else.

In these brave days China was used to cruel and dreadful masters, but in a land noted for the perversity of its overlords the name of Quong was feared above all others.

Shortly after the Mandarin usurped his father's throne in the Great Palace he had

given evidences of those qualities which caused many of his people to flee to Canton's coast where now the foreign devils had landed with many ships.

Those that remained after Quong's accession did so because they were unable to leave the lands; but in them was the same fear which had driven their more fortunate companions to seek the safety of seaward lands.

They feared Quong even as a boy, for he had given many instances of his cruel precocity when a mere lad in his father's house. With the impatience of youth he did not bother to amuse himself, as his brothers did, with the flogging and torturing of slaves. He was eager for death-throes, for the spasms of agony, and the servants he toyed with died swiftly in the dark dungeons. It was only in adolescence that he learned to control the intensity of his lusts; then he turned to the more subtle tortures. And not for long did he feel satisfied with the Copper Bowl, the Water-Death, or the Seven Bamboo Chastisements. The time-honored devices of his father's hired torture-masters he improved on, and his days were spent in the study of pain.

Now this was well, for the future Master must govern his people strictly and be quick to wrath, but even the conservative graybeards whispered that young Quong possessed a devil within him which knew delight only in debauches of cruelty.

It is true that his first favorites were seldom fated to survive his yearning for experiment over the period of a month; only families utterly destitute sold their daughters into the House of Quong. Each passing month saw the young man's quest of Pleasure in Pain increase its horror; he grew pale from long hours spent in dark cells and murky oubliettes. This could be readily understood in an old man, whose other pleasures were few, but for a youth it was not seemly to be so confined. Still, Quong was precocious.

This precocity further evinced itself in Quong's judicious disposal of his three brothers, who found their last cups of rice wine to be very bitter indeed. They died quietly, without ostentation, and it was only to be expected when one morning the old Mandarin, Quong's father, went to his ancestors with the cord of a silken bowstring for a necklace about his throat.

Then Quong was Lord of the House, and high Mandarin over the jungles, the plains, and the village lands of all his people. His regal reign started with a most sumptuous funeral in honor of his father, and then he gave the people of his city a noble tiger-hunting in the streets of a little village close by. But these evidences of propriety did not wholly satisfy his subjects, who unkindly grumbled about the vast number of coolies who were immolated outside his father's tomb during the funeral ceremonies. Other ungrateful coolies said that the tiger-hunt was spoiled by the deaths of almost the entire populace in the village where it occurred.

But when Mandarin Quong made the pronouncement about his law, the flights to the coast began. Quong as Mandarin was the judge over all criminal trials in his domain, but he now specified that he would usurp the office of executioner as well. In the first three years of his official rule every case brought before him ended in conviction; and there were many cases, due to his increasing his force of guardsmen and the peculiar system whereby he paid them a bounty for each criminal obtained. This he could well afford, for an increasing number of crimes seemed to be discovered among the wealthier merchant and land-holding class, and conviction carried with it a con-

fiscation of money and property to Quong's house.

As an executioner, Quong scorned beheading or any of the accepted modes of torture. No longer was the sentence carried out in public; Quong preferred the darkness of his palace dungeons or his ivory Hall of State. Here, it was averred, the walls were lined with human heads, mounted as one might mount the head of a deer or a buffalo.

In an effort to discourage such unfortunate predilections toward torture, one of Quong's advisers subtly hinted that his constant stay indoors was injurious to the health of the Mandarin.

It was then that Quong built his garden—his beautiful Chinese garden behind the palace, where trees and flowers and mirroring-pools opened to the sky. And he built racks and wheels and scaffolds that blossomed with evil fruit, so that things went much the same as they had in the old dungeons below the Palace.

But Nature stirred a new love of beauty in the Mandarin's breast. He caused vines to grow upon the iron racks to conceal the rusty stains; trained creepers to hide the stark lines of his scaffolds. Sometimes he walked in the gardens alone, and was serenaded by musicians from concealed glades and dells.

For the birds did not rest here. Blood nourished the fantastic flowers, and the perfume of rare orchids was rich in the air; but over all was the carrion taint that brought crows and vultures but kept the songsters away. Nightingales and finches shunned the green confines, and those brought by the animal-venders flew away with peepings of terror rather than chirps of song. Even the scarlet macaws and green parrots refused to color the landscape with their presence, and the garden remained incomplete without its musical background.

But at this time the two missionaries came to Quong at the Palace, and asked if they might stay. They were foreign devils; Portuguese, in robes of black, who spoke a curious tongue and blasphemed against Lord Buddha, the Four Books, and Kwong-Fu-Tze with equally impartial fervor.

Some of their paraphernalia interested the Mandarin, who spent several days with the queer thunder-sticks which worked on principles so divergent from Chinese guns; the sextants, silver watches, and other marvels brought from the court of King John.

They had birds, in cages—tiny yellow birds, that sang with infinite sweetness. Canaries, the priests called them, and their golden beauty much impressed the Mandarin; so much so, that after listening to an especially severe tirade against his torturing and cruelties by the two missionaries, he conducted them to the garden and accorded them the fate of the One they called their Master.

And he loosed the canaries in the garden, and beheld with pleasure that they did not fly away but remained close to him. To his great amusement one of them perched upon the sagging shoulder of the first priest, and sang up into the dead face with affectionate fervor. He rewarded the birds with the most delicate of meats—the tongue of the priest.

Perhaps, he mused, it would instill the creatures with the eloquence of their former masters.

This did not occur, but the birds stayed. And within a few years they had multiplied a hundredfold, then grew to many thousands. They filled the garden by day, and then fared afield at will, returning only toward twilight to await the feast spread for them.

They had developed a terrible appetite for the ghastly fruit which ripened daily in the garden sunlight. It had arisen at

the first, and as generation after generation lived and bred and died in the torture-maze, the blood-strain carried with it the nameless hunger.

Formerly Quong had set aside a burial-ground on his lands, but now only bones need be piled in his great cellars. The birds, thousands strong, did the rest. And after a time they learned to await his signal.

Over all the garden Quong had set up little metal bars which played a curious scale. Upon completing his daily dispensing of justice, he would summon the flock with his chimes and they came to partake of his largess. Afterward they raised their voices in the sweet reward of song—and it was a song infinitely more beautiful than any the Mandarin had ever known. It soothed him like mellow wine, set his blood tingling like the hands of one well-beloved, thrilled his imaginative senses like moonlight over dragon-guarded pools. He loved his birds, loved their daily tribute.

But others feared them. Men learned of his canaries, saw the flocks speed over their fields and descend at will to ravish the grain and seeds. They were not molested lest this incur the Mandarin's displeasure. The growing horde swarmed about the cities and villages, and none might wave them from the streets. A dead bird meant a dead man if the Mandarin's guards found the creature.

The legend of their feastings in the garden became known, and after that strange tales were told of the foreign devils who had brought the birds as spies. It was whispered that the tiny chattering creatures possessed human souls; that they sucked evil nourishment from the dead, and absorbed the wisdom of men which they used when prying about the streets. Other lore hinted that they reported to the Mandarin the misdeeds which they observed in daily flight, and they came to be hated and feared as living symbols of the terrible power which ruled the land.

3

Now lately Quong had devised a new torture which pleased him greatly. He was writing, on many parchments, a history of Pain to bequeath to the Great School in Peking, and it heartened him to be able to include interesting variations invented by himself.

This Death of a Thousand Arrows was such an invention. Barbed darts of various sizes, shot with various degrees of force into certain carefully-selected portions of a victim's body, produced a lingering torment delightful to members of the aristocracy of Pain.

Quong had devised the idea himself, but he needed an expert bowman to assist him. It was then that he sought Hin-Tze, the Emperor's archer, and offered him employment.

Hin-Tze came to the Palace with his wife Yu-Li, and the Mandarin noted with pleasure that his bowman was efficient and the bowman's wife lovely to look upon.

So it was not many days after Hin-Tze first employed himself with victims in the garden that the Mandarin caused the woman to be removed to his quarters and gave himself over to dalliance.

The archer learned of this, and his heart was sore. He did not like his dreadful task, but he had come at the Emperor's command and dared not disobey. He hated the cruelty, hated the Mandarin, and was repelled by the nauseous birds whose unnatural feastings gave him such qualms as he had never known on the battlefield. Indeed, one day he had accidentally pierced a yellow body with an arrow—and only the fact that the canary had winged itself within the line of flight

saved him from the Mandarin's wrath. He was a soldier, and to him the music of the canaries was not sweet after the spectacle of their dining.

Now that his wife had been taken, Hin-Tze was very bitter in his heart against Lord Quong, though he dared not speak. He feared, instead, for he had heard tales of the Mandarin's love.

And one evening not many weeks after the taking of his woman, Quong grew enraged and with his dagger slit the golden throat of his new favorite so that pretty Yu-li died sobbing her husband's name.

Hin-Tze saw, and said nothing, even when the pitiful limp form was carried into the garden by servants.

He returned to his quarters and sat alone in the moonlight, awaiting what he knew he would hear. And then came that sweet, detestable song from the tree-tops, the satisfied song of the canaries. At that moment Hin-Tze swore his oath against the Mandarin, against the desecration of his wife's body, which was not even accorded godly burial but sacrificed instead to a few moments of melody from the hateful tiny throats of Quong's friends.

Of this he said no word to the Mandarin, for that was not seemly; and with lordly courtesy Quong forbore mentioning the occurrence when they met the next day.

Hin-Tze carried a bound coolie into the garden sunlight; a poor, choking wretch who had stolen a few taels in some market outside the town. He pleaded with Hin-Tze as he walked, and it was curious to the archer to hear that the doomed man did not fear death nearly so much as he feared the loss of his immortal soul. He and all the people were afraid of the canaries of Quong, whose feasting deprived them of proper burial.

But Hin-Tze said nothing as he slipped a knife through the man's bonds and awaited the Mandarin.

Quong strode down the path, smiling in the sunshine. A fat prisoner—a greater song. He advanced, beaming serenely on his bowman, whose gentle tact in ignoring the unfortunate accident of the previous evening he greatly admired. Quong clapped his hands to signal that the ritual binding begin, and indicated the great tree as the one to which the victim was to be tied.

But the Lord of Pleasure and Pain was chagrined when the prisoner suddenly wheeled and bolted off through the garden, his severed bonds trailing behind him. He opened his mouth, forming it for a shout of anger; but it gaped still wider in astonishment as Hin-Tze advanced and seized him by the throat. There was a great arrow in the bowman's hand, and its point was barbed. It moved slowly toward the Mandarin's neck as he struggled back against the tree-trunk. His face paled at what he read in his captor's gleaming eyes.

It was then that he babbled for mercy and screamed, and struck out wildly. But Hin-Tze drew the barbed point over the breast of Quong and pinned him to the tree.

Then the bowman stepped back and fixed an arrow to his great bow. He shot the dart, eyes blind with rage and ears deaf to the cries of his living target. He drew, fixed, fired automatically; a half-hundred times perhaps, he aimed with eyes dazzled by a sort of madness. Only then was vengeance appeased—only then did he cease and approach the living horror that still stood before the tree-trunk.

One of the hands was moving, a bloody claw. It curled around the bark, fumbling, fumbling. It rested, then moved again. And suddenly shrill chimes rang upon the air—chimes that summoned and commanded. The hand fell, but into the glaz-

ing eyes crept a look of triumph and of craftiness. The lips worked piteously.

"Lift me down," whispered the Mandarin.

Hin-Tze, confused, drew the pinioning arrow forth and the body of the dying Quong slumped forward as though fainting in his arms.

Too late did Hin-Tze see the arrow torn from the flesh; the arrow in the hand that now struck with every ounce of strength that remained in the broken arms. With a last effort, the Mandarin had nailed him to the tree!

The figure in the gorgeous robes fell earthward, but Quong's triumphant eyes still stared up into Hin-Tze's pain-contorted face.

"I have summoned the birds," said the Mandarin, faintly. "They are my friends, and they come when the chimes call. You have heard the legends which say my canaries possess living souls—the souls of the dead that once hung upon the tree where you hang now."

The Mandarin shuddered a moment, then fell silent. At last he whispered again.

"This is not true. The birds are simply birds; they know me and they love me, for I have prepared for them many feasts. Therefore vengeance for my death shall rest with them. And—I shall hear one last song as I die."

Hin-Tze understood then. He struggled to free himself, but the arrow held him so that he hung by the barbs that nailed him to the tree of horror.

He clawed and screamed when he heard the rustling sounds, moaned aloud as the golden cloud hummed down toward him. And then they were all about with their beating wings, their tiny beaks that stabbed sharply, cruelly, with dreadful hunger. Blood blinded him, two winged knives flew to his eyes, and the golden glow faded to black pain. For a few moments longer he writhed beneath the beaks of his tiny tormenters. Then the cloud settled down in silence.

Upon the ground lay the Mandarin Quong. His wounds were forgotten, for he had the nature of a poet. This final revenge, this last triumph in defeat, was atonement. He watched every movement of the raptorial birds, drank in their graceful beauty to the full. And soon he would hear the song—the final song before death.

For he had spoken truly to Hin-Tze. The birds loved him; and they were only birds. The notion of psychopomps—the absurd superstition that these creatures of his possessed the souls of the dead from his garden—was incredible.

Quong watched the yellow swarm move across the body of the bowman. They rose, chittering. In a moment the song would commence. The Mandarin awaited the perfection of the poet's death.

They rose—and suddenly one of the tiny birds detached itself from the sun-bright cluster. It was a tiny female—and it flew straight down toward the skeleton on the tree. It perched, absurdly, upon the fleshless ribs; as though peering into the bony bars of a cage.

Quong gazed with new interest. He drew himself up on one elbow, painfully. The bird was sitting there—and then—there were two birds!

Was it hallucination, dying delirium? Or had another bird suddenly appeared from *inside* the skeleton? A yellow form, whirring within the ribs where the heart had been?

And now the two winged out, together. Their beady little eyes rested upon the recumbent form of the Mandarin.

He sank back, strange horror tugging

at his heart. A female bird—Yu-Li. And a male from the skeleton of the dead bowman! *Psychopomps?*

The two flew upward, to where the yellow cloud hovered in midair. They flew to the forefront, shrilling as though in command. And then they wheeled, swooped down. Quong screamed in utter fear. Dead souls were exacting *their* vengeance. Yellow knives stabbed and struck home; ten thousand fluttering forms tore and clawed at the writhing thing upon the ground.

And so there was no one to hear the final moment when it came—it was in a deserted garden that the last sweet serenade was sung by the canaries of the Mandarin Quong.

The Wood

By H. P. LOVECRAFT

They cut it down, and where the pitch-black aisles
  Of forest night had hid eternal things,
They scaled the sky with towers and marble piles
  To make a city for their revellings.

White and amazing to the lands around
  That wondrous wealth of domes and turrets rose;
Crystal and ivory, sublimely crown'd
  With pinnacles that bore unmelting snows.

And through its halls the pipe and sistrum rang,
  While wine and riot brought their scarlet stains;
Never a voice of elder marvels sang,
  Nor any eye called up the hills and plains.

Thus down the years, till on one purple night
  A drunken minstrel in his careless verse
Spoke the vile words that should not see the light,
  And stirr'd the shadows of an ancient curse.

Forests may fall, but not the dust they shield;
  So on the spot where that proud city stood,
The shuddering dawn no single stone reveal'd,
  But fled the blackness of a primal wood.

"She leaped with the swiftness of a tigress, drawing her own dagger from her belt."

The Fire Princess

By EDMOND HAMILTON

A thrill-tale of intrigue and weird horror in the terrible valley of Koom, the hidden city—a story of the Place of Power that was the tomb of the Ancient Ones

The Story Thus Far

GARY MARTIN, secret agent of the United States, has been sent on a perilous mission on which depends the peace of the world. He has gone into the mountains of mysterious Tibet, seeking the legended, forbidden kingdom of Koom in which dwells a sacred white race. The superstitious peoples of Asia believe that a princess of that hidden race is coming forth soon to lead them to world conquest. Gary's mis-

This story began in WEIRD TALES for August

sion is to prevent her from coming forth and plunging the world into war.

But other nations have also sent secret agents to that weird, hidden land, each with orders to get control of this princess for their own country, so that she can be used as a tool to dominate the fanatical peoples of Asia. Japan has sent its famed ace spy, Major Okara. Russia has sent its chief agent, Boris Borchoff, and Britain has sent a steel-nerved girl spy, Joan Laird. These three spies plot against each other and against Gary Martin, as they penetrate into the mountains where lies the hidden kingdom.

Gary Martin and his three spy-rivals succeed in entering Koom, which lies in a valley completely surrounded by towering volcanoes. The city of this hidden kingdom is situated beside a fiery sea of molten lava, from which a lava river runs through a natural tunnel out of the valley. The four enemy spies are seized by the soldiers of Koom, white men in silver armor, by command of Shirani, their princess and ruler.

Shirani shows interest in Gary Martin —and thereby arouses the jealousy of Jhulun, one of the nobles of Koom. Gary learns that Shirani does mean to go forth into the outside world and lead the superstitious nomad peoples to conquest. He learns also that in this valley, ages ago, lived a strange race of mighty, unhuman beings, the Ancient Ones, who possessed vast powers. Then Dridim, the high priest of the Ancient Ones, demands that Shirani hand over to him the four strangers so that they may be put to death according to the ancient law.

The story continues:

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7. *Jhulun's Jealousy*

For a moment after the high priest's demand, Shirani seemed unable to speak. A red tide of blood surged up in her clear brow, her breasts heaved under the silken tunic, and her blue eyes darkened with anger until the tiny lightnings in them blazed forth almost destroyingly at the man before her.

Yet Dridim flinched no whit from the white passion of the princess. The pale, cold face of the high priest might have been chiseled from marble, and his inflexible gaze never flickered when finally the silver voice of the princess rang out in the great hall.

"I *must* hand over the strangers to you?" Shirani repeated burningly. "Why, Dridim, you have forgotten yourself, I think. You are not speaking now to one of your creeping, black-robed underlings. You are speaking to the princess of Koom!"

Her voice flared. "If you were any but a priest, I'd show you what it means to say *must* to me! I'd have you whipped around my palace until you begged for pardon upon your knees!"

A tense silence was on everyone in the group and on the listening Koomian nobles, as Shirani's blazing outburst of anger ended. The hush in the dusky palace hall was strained and taut.

Gary saw Jhulun step forward, his arrogant face now as worried as those of the other Koomians, and seek to calm Shirani.

"Best not give way to wrath," Gary heard Jhulun whisper anxiously to the princess. "Dridim still holds that which we must have, the key to the Place of Power."

Dridim heard that whisper! For Gary saw a strange flash in the high priest's icy eyes.

"Aye, Jhulun, I still hold the key to the Place of Power, which you and Shirani and your sacrilegious followers seek," said Dridim bitingly. "And you shall not obtain it from me, for I hold it in sacred trust from the Ancient Ones of long ago.

The Ancient Ones, the mighty ones who were before man was, passed long ago to death, but before they did so they decreed that the people of Koom should remain in this valley for ever to guard the Place of Power. And they decreed also that the key to that sacred Place should be held by the high priest of their law, so that no wicked ones should secure it. And I shall never give up that key to you for your evil purposes, no matter how long you beg for it."

Dridim's voice rang forth with compelling, fanatic power. Gary Martin, uncomprehending, yet felt a cold thrill down his back. He saw a touch of awe on the faces of the Koomians, even of Jhulun. But Shirani's slim figure stiffened, and her blazing blue eyes clashed with visible shock against the icy gaze of the high priest.

"No matter how long we beg for it?" she repeated ominously. "Dridim, I tell you now, that I am tired of begging you for the key. Yes," she flared, "I weary of begging you for it, and I and all the people of Koom weary of spending our lives imprisoned in this narrow valley, when outside lies a world which we could conquer easily, once we had that key."

Shirani swung about, and her silver voice called like a challenging bugle to the tense, watching Koomians in the great hall.

"Do I not speak truth, nobles of Koom?"

"The princess speaks truth!" roared back scores of voices, faces suddenly flaming fierce. "The Ancient Ones have been dead for ages—their law is dead also. Give your princess the key to the Place of Power, that we may win lordship of the outer world!"

"You hear, Dridim?" cried Shirani, eyes flaming as she swung back to the high priest. "What say you to *that?*"

Dridim's pale eyes were bitter as they looked out from the shadow of his cowl at the fierce, excited men of Koom.

"I say that your desire is evil, and that this princess who inflamed you with that desire is more evil still," he said harshly. "The Ancient Ones have been long dead, yes—but the law they left us is not dead. It still remains, and while it remains you shall never procure that key which would only bring doom upon you."

He turned to Shirani, and pointed a bony finger at Gary Martin and Joan, and Okara and the Russian, who had been standing bewildered spectators of this tense scene.

"Shirani, for the last time I demand you yield up these strangers to me, according to the law," he declared.

"And for the last time, I refuse!" flamed Shirani. "That law is as dusty dead as they who spoke it. And I warn *you* that I mean to have the key to the Place of Power, if not by one way, then by another."

Dridim started a little, for the first time, at her words. Then he said darkly, "You have gone far, I see, along the road of mad and unholy ambition, to make such a threat to me. But I tell you again that your ambition will never bear fruit, for never shall you obtain the power that you lust for."

And the high priest moved silently through the crowd, the Koomians involuntarily making way for him and the two nervous priests behind him. The three black-robed figures passed out of the hall.

SHIRANI's beautiful face throbbed with hate as she looked after them. Her eyes flashed as she raised her voice.

"Men of Koom, you have heard the superstitious warnings of that fanatic priest. Speak, do you wish to heed him and wear out your lives here, or do you still desire to follow me to the conquest of the outer world?"

"We follow you, princess!" rang a crashing shout, and dozens of swords flashed glittering in the air in wild salute.

"I see that you are still men, and not children afraid of old sayings," commended Shirani, her brilliant eyes approving them. "Now you may go. Soon Dridim must give up the key to us, and then will come the great day when we shall make the whole world easy prey for our conquest."

With another enthusiastic shout, the nobles of Koom streamed out of the hall. But Gary observed that the silver-armored guards remained, alertly watching the four prisoners.

Jhulun stepped forward to Shirani, a frown upon the Koomian noble's handsome, arrogant face.

"Was it wise to threaten Dridim?" he asked. "He will never give up the key to you now, after those threats."

"Then I'll take it from him!" Shirani exclaimed passionately. "I'll raise my people to break into that moldering temple and tear the key away from Dridim, even if we must kill him."

Jhulun shook his head. "No, princess —the people of Koom would not dare to touch a priest of the Ancient Ones, even now. No matter how much the people detest the priests, the old law is so strong in their blood that they would fear to take the key to the Place of Power by force."

"There are other ways than by force, then," Shirani said darkly. "I'll get the key from Dridim, by one way or another."

Her eyes fell on the four prisoners, and rested on Gary Martin's lean, puzzled face. The mocking smile came back to her face.

"You should be grateful to me, stranger, that I did not give you up to Dridim," she told Gary. "He and his priests would have tossed all four of you into the fiery sea, according to the ancient law."

"And we should do the same to these strangers, now!" Jhulun declared angrily. "They are as much your enemies as Dridim. What good can it do to keep them living?"

"Did I not say I meant to question them about the outside world?" Shirani retorted imperiously. "There is very much about that world that we need to know before we go forth to conquer it."

Boris Borchoff chuckled. And instantly the princess turned upon the Russian, her expression dangerous.

"You laugh, red-faced one?" she questioned. "It seems amusing to you that we few people of Koom plan to conquer all the world?"

She laughed softly herself. "It will not seem so amusing to you, when the day comes that we act. Yes, upon that day when the power of all the outside nations is broken and destroyed in one day, then you will not feel mirth—if you are still living then!"

The last words flashed out in an open threat. Borchoff hastily attempted apology, but Shirani ignored him and called the captain of the silver-armored guards, a tall, stalwart man with a hard, lined face.

"Grauh, you will take these strangers to an apartment here in the palace, and keep them guarded," she ordered. "I'll send you my orders concerning them."

Grauh, the captain of guards, nodded and told Gary and his companions curtly, "Come with me."

But Okara had been whispering rapidly in the last few moments to Jhulun. Gary had noticed that Jhulun's face had become surprized as he listened. Now Jhulun stepped hastily forward.

"Princess, I would like to take this one of the strangers with me, for the time being," he said, indicating Okara. "As you

know, he claims to be one of the nomad peoples who await your coming outside the mountains. I will investigate his claim, to see if it be true."

"Take him if you wish," Shirani replied indifferently. "I do not like his crafty yellow face. You are responsible for him."

She strode away across the audience hall, a slim white figure swinging through the shafts of sunlight in the dusky room.

The captain, Grauh, indicated to Gary and Joan and Borchoff to follow him in a different direction. There was nothing but to obey, since Grauh's silver guards were behind with drawn swords. But as they went, Gary looked back worriedly at Jhulun and Okara.

"That cursed little Jap is plotting something," muttered Borchoff, looking back also. The Russian's red face was worried.

"This way, strangers," ordered Grauh. The hard-faced Koomian captain led them into a dusky corridor and then up a stone stair.

THE guards conducted them up to the third floor of the vast black palace. It was a gloomy, dusky labyrinth of stone stairs and rooms and passages, high windows here and there admitting slanting sunlight. They saw guard-rooms, arsenals of swords and spears, dwelling-rooms of Koomian nobles. Serving-men and girls in blue silk passed in the corridors.

Grauh finally showed the three into the apartment assigned them, and then left after posting guards outside the door. They had been given two large rooms, barbaric, black stone chambers with high ceilings and woven white wool rugs. There were a few chairs and tables of carved wood and two padded couches in each room. Gary went over to the big window that admitted the afternoon sunlight. Borchoff and Joan followed.

The three spies looked out. The sheer walls of the great palace rose above and sank below the window. Sixty feet beneath lay the triangular black plaza, narrowing to the distant apex at which stood the massive, octagonal temple of the Ancient Ones. Beyond it lay the massed flat rooms of Koom, and beyond the black city glowed the evil vermilion fire sea, burning beneath the thundercloud volcano from which the lava cataract fell.

"This city—incredible!" exclaimed Boris Borchoff. "And that princess—she is like a flame! When she goes forth from this valley, all the nomads of Central Asia will flock wildly to her standard."

"She's not going forth, to bring war on Asia and the world," Gary said grimly. "That's why I'm here, to stop her, and I'm going to do it."

Borchoff's round, red face was worried. He grunted, "We are all four playing the great game for our nations, even here. Okara is plotting now with Jhulun, to make Shirani an instrument of Japan. And if he succeeds——"

"He won't succeed," Gary predicted, "any more than you or Joan could succeed in making her a tool of Russia or Britain. What does Shirani care for our politics? She is obsessed with her mad scheme of leading the superstitious nomad hordes to world conquest." He muttered thoughtfully, "She could set all interior Asia on fire, all right, a warrior-girl like that. And her people are with her on the plan to emerge from the valley. But obviously those priests oppose the plan, because it would break the law of the Ancient Ones."

"Who *were* the Ancient Ones, I wonder?" Joan said, puzzled. "And what is this Place of Power they were arguing about?"

Gary shrugged. "Every race like this has legends of super-beings or gods of the remote past. The Place of Power is probably some queer shrine to which

these people attach superstitious importance." He added, "Shirani seems to think she must have the key to this Place of Power before she can conquer the world. And the high priest won't give her the key, and she won't go forth to conquest until she has it, for some reason. She'll never go forth, if I can stop her!"

Borchoff grinned at Gary. "You will have the advantage over the rest of us in this game, now — you have taken the fancy of the princess."

"That's damned nonsense," Gary declared harshly.

"Not a bit of it," the Russian declared. "Shirani has—what do you call it?—fallen for you. You're a stranger, a man of the outer world she longs for, and you're handsomer than Okara or myself."

Joan told Gary stingingly, with scorn in her brown eyes, "A little discreet love-making, and Shirani will do anything you ask."

He was about to retort angrily when the door opened and a serving-man came in past the guards outside. He laid down in front of each of them silken tunics and trousers such as the Koomians wore.

"From the princess," he said softly, and retired.

"Didn't I say Shirani had fallen for you, comrade?" exclaimed Borchoff, looking at the garments and laughing. "See, she sends you the white dress of a noble, and us two the blue dress of plebeians."

Joan bit her lip, then picked up her garments and went into the next room. She closed the door with a slam.

"I believe she's jealous," Borchoff chuckled. "You are a great man with the ladies, Comrade Martin. And a quick worker, eh?"

"Shut your dirty mouth, Boris," Gary ordered angrily. The big Russian only laughed.

They found a big pottery bath-bowl and tank of water in the corner of the room, and Gary had his razor in his pocket. After bathing and shaving he donned the white silk tunic and trousers, buckling the silver belts that confined them. The garments felt cool to his tired body.

The room was beginning to darken, the sun setting behind the western wall of the valley. Borchoff had donned his blue silk garments, his huge frame almost bursting them, and now Joan came in from the other room in the same garb, looking like a belligerent small boy.

"Ought I to bow before you, now that you're a noble and I'm one of the proletariat?" she asked Gary ironically.

"Don't be a fool," he said roughly.

Now into the darkening rooms came Grauh, the captain of guards, with two serving-men. One of them brought sputtering silver lamps, and the other some bowls of fruits and cooked vegetables and meats.

"Your supper," Grauh told Joan and Borchoff laconically, and then told Gary, "You sup with the princess tonight. I am to take you."

"It seems I was not wrong, comrade," Borchoff grinned at the American. Joan stared at Gary, a scorn in her eyes that stung him.

Defiantly, he followed Grauh out of the room. Two guardsmen fell in behind them as they went through the dusky corridors, now lit by infrequent hanging lamps. They passed down to the second story of the palace, and through an anteroom in which two silver guards were posted.

GARY found himself in the apartments of the princess, great rooms whose black stone walls bore hangings of vivid silk. Grauh conducted him through them, out onto a small balcony, and there the captain left him. A small table was set on the balcony, but there was no one else

there, and no light but the weird red glow from the distant fire-lake.

The sea of fire beyond the city had been appalling by day, but now, by night, it was stupefying—a burning, smoldering lake of red fire that threw up into the dark heavens a shaking glare that dimmed the stars, that painted the huge snow-slopes of the surrounding volcanoes wild scarlet, that shot banners and rays of unholy, trembling radiance across the flat, black roofs of nighted Koom.

And the fire cataract that fell into that sea! It was a wild glory that blazed supernaturally in the darkness, the living lava stream leaping sheer from that crevice high in the side of the vast volcano, and tumbling in flaming red splendor down into the burning sea. It dazzled the eyes, a wall of living fire that dominated the whole dark city and valley.

Gary was staring at it fascinatedly when the silver voice of Shirani behind him made him turn, startled.

"Is there aught like that in the outside world?" she asked, waving toward the terrible fire sea and cataract.

Shirani wore other and slightly different white silk tunic and trousers now, he noted. In the weird red glow, her beautiful face was curious in expression as she looked up at him.

"Never have I seen anything like that in the outer world, princess," Gary told her.

"*You* may call me Shirani," she said sweetly. "You said your name was what —Gary? I like it. Sit now, Gary, and we shall eat."

Gary felt a little bewildered as he sat down at the small table opposite her. For now Shirani seemed but a soft, tender young girl, instead of the mocking witch who had teased Jhulun with such deviltry, or that imperious, passionate princess who had fiercely threatened Dridim.

Comely, silken serving-maids softly changed the silver dishes and poured thick black wine from the flagons. Gary found himself amazingly hungry. The warm food drove back his exhaustion, and the potent wine warmed his brain. Shirani watched him in silent, almost shy curiosity, as they ate. They rose finally and stood looking out from the balcony rail at the dark city and the fiery sea. Gary spoke suddenly to her.

"Shirani, this kingdom of yours is wonderful, beautiful. Why do you desire so greatly to leave it?"

Her slight figure stiffened and he saw her gold head jerk up in a dynamic gesture.

"Because I want to live!" she exclaimed. "It is not living to rust away in ignoble security. To act, to dare, to take the most dangerous adventure that offers, *that* is living. Do you not believe that?"

"Yes, I do," he said impulsively.

"I knew you did," Shirani said eagerly. "Otherwise you would never have dared such great hazards to reach this secret land."

"Still," said Gary earnestly, "war and death are not the purpose of living. And if you go forth into the outer world to lead the nomad races who await you, you take war and death to millions of men."

"And what of that?" Shirani demanded. "I am not afraid of death, Gary —and I am not afraid to deal it to others. Those millions would die anyway, in time. And I will not remain the petty princess of this little valley, who might be a conquering queen of the outer world."

"But power does not always bring happiness," Gary protested. "Indeed, a power wrung out of blood and tears never brings it."

"Do you think then it is common happiness, a smug, safe content, that I

seek?" Shirani exclaimed. "Gary, Gary, I thought you had read me better than that. It is the adventure, the wild gamble and struggle, that enthrall me. *They* are the happiness I seek!"

Her white face seemed blazing in the light of the crimson, shaking glare from the distant fire sea.

"But, Shirani," Gary persisted, "this dream of conquest of yours is mad. Even with the nomad hordes, you cannot hope to conquer the outside world. You may cause much conflict and chaos for a time, but soon the great nations will easily destroy you and your savage hordes."

"No, Gary, they will not," Shirani said firmly. "For before ever I go forth from Koom, I shall hold the key to powers which will break the might of those nations like a reed."

Gary looked at her skeptically. He guessed she was thinking of the superstitious shrine these people called the Place of Power.

He was about to voice his skepticism, when Shirani suddenly pressed her warm fingers against his lips, laughing up at him with one of her quick changes of mood.

"Let us talk no more now of these things, Gary. I am tired of them tonight —yes, tired to the soul of everything in Koom. That is why I like you, who bring the breath of the outer world into this valley."

She looked up at him, her teasing eyes examining his face with pretended naïveté. "You are not handsome, Gary—not nearly so handsome as Jhulun. Did you know that I have half promised myself to Jhulun in marriage?"

"I didn't know—and I don't care," Gary said curtly.

Her silver laughter chimed. Gary was strongly aware that she was very close to him, the faint perfume of her hair stirring his blood, her very proximity seeming to send an electric current through him.

"I think you must be afraid of Jhulun," Shirani mocked tauntingly. "Or afraid of me, because I am princess of Koom."

No man living could have ignored such a gay taunt. He grasped her silken arm.

"Afraid of you?" he repeated, then laughed harshly. "You flatter yourself, Shirani. You may have these tow-haired lads here afraid of you, but to me you're just a damned handsome barbarian wench."

"You dare say that!" she flamed, eyes blazing up at him instantly. "Loose my arm!"

Gary laughed aloud. His lean arm swept her silken, vibrant figure against him, and as her imperious face blazed up at him with lips parted to exclaim something, he bent and kissed her hard on the mouth.

The feel of Shirani's soft, parted lips against his own stabbed a dizzying high-voltage shock to Gary's brain. It was like holding a bundle of high-tension force to have her silken body in his arms. He was quivering a little when he drew his dark head back.

"Now call your guards and tell them that you met one man who wasn't frightened of you," Gary rasped.

Shirani's blue eyes were dark and strange in her white face. Then they suddenly widened—she was now looking *past* him.

"Behind you, Gary!" she cried sharply.

Gary spun around. In the doorway of the balcony stood Jhulun, glaring at them. The Koomian noble's handsome face was dreadful in the weird red glare, contorted with wild jealousy.

JHULUN ripped out his sword. Then with an inarticulate cry of fury, he raised the blade and rushed toward Gary with deadly purpose. There was murder

in his eyes, blinding hate and jealousy in every line of his distorted, handsome face.

Gary thrust Shirani swiftly away from him, even as Jhulun stabbed. A lightning last-minute twist of the body barely took the American out of line of the thrusting sword. As it was, he felt the blade tear through the sleeve of his white silk tunic.

Jhulun whirled for another thrust, but before he could make it, Gary leaped desperately in past his weapon. With all the force he possessed, Gary swung with his clenched right fist for the other's jaw. The smashing blow sent Jhulun reeling backward, and he fell heavily, his silver helmet and armor clanging on the balcony's stone floor.

Gary swiftly stooped and snatched up the sword that Jhulun had dropped as he fell. And the American gripped it, his face wrathful.

"Guards!" Shirani's silver voice was pealing. There was a running of hasty feet.

"I ought to kill this murderous hound, now!" Gary exclaimed furiously, staring down at Jhulun with slitted eyes. "He would have killed me."

"No, Gary!" Shirani exclaimed urgently. "Jhulun was mad with jealousy to see me in your arms, that is all. Do not harm him."

The guards came bursting out onto the balcony with the hard-faced captain Grauh in the lead. Grauh's sword was drawn and as he glimpsed Gary standing with a sword over the fallen Jhulun, he sprang forward.

"No, Grauh—the stranger has done no wrong," Shirani cried quickly. "It was the lord Jhulun who—lost his temper."

Jhulun picked himself up, and stood, breathing hard, choking with his rage, glaring at the American, his eyes pools of hot hate.

"Princess, will you allow this outland dog to strike a noble of Koom and live?" he cried ragingly.

Shirani eyed him coldly. "It was your own fault he struck you, Jhulun. You attacked him without reason."

"Without reason?" cried Jhulun. "Is it not reason enough that I find him embracing our princess against her will?"

"How know you that it was against my will?" Shirani asked him coolly.

Jhulun looked thunderstruck. His stunned gaze moved from her cold face to Gary Martin. Then his rage burst forth, intensified.

"Are you implying that you were in this outlander's arms *willingly?*" he cried to Shirani. "You, who promised yourself to me——"

"That promise was never definite, Jhulun!" flared Shirani. "I am not bound by whatever ambitious hopes you may have had."

In the weird red light, Jhulun's handsome face became black as a thundercloud. His steely eyes slitted, his voice was grating.

"I apologize, princess," he said thickly. "I will go now, if I may have my sword."

Shirani signed to Gary to give it to him. The Koomian noble thrust it back into his sheath and strode jerkily away.

"Wait in the anteroom as before, Grauh," Shirani told the captain of guards. And when they had gone, she looked at Gary with a curiously quizzical look in her eyes. "You have made an enemy, Gary. He would kill you if he could—yes, and Grauh also would have killed you had I told them that it was against my will you kissed me."

"Shirani, *was* it against your will?" Gary asked boldly. "It did not seem so to me!"

He half expected her imperious anger to flare up again. But instead Shirani laughed up at him like a teasing child.

"You are too audacious, Gary. Daring men never live to old age."

One of the silken serving-maids came out onto the balcony and softly whispered something into her ear. Shirani started a little, and Gary saw the excited flash of her blue eyes.

"Tell Bator to wait a moment," she ordered the maid. And then she told the American, "It grows late—you must go now, Gary. Grauh will take you back to your apartment."

"Still going to keep me guarded, eh?" said Gary ironically. "You still don't trust me?"

"Not entirely," Shirani said frankly. "I sense a ruthless and determined will in you, Gary. I think you would do much to save that outer world of yours from my conquest."

"Shirani, can't you give up that mad plan of conquest?" Gary asked her with deep earnestness. "For I repeat, it is a mad and impossible dream."

"It is *not* impossible, though you think so!" she declared forcefully. "I tell you, once I gain the key to the Place of Power, I hold your nations in the hollow of my hand. Even now, the priest Bator——"

She stopped, as though unwilling to say more. Gary perceived that he was dismissed, and bowed and turned. Her voice halted him when he reached the door.

"Gary, that pale girl who entered Koom with you and the others—is she really your enemy as you said? Or are you her lover?"

"Joan?" said Gary surprizedly. Then he said ruefully, "She is my enemy and rival. She tricked me, and hates me now."

"I am glad!" Shirani said suddenly, smiling at him.

Grauh and the guards were waiting for Gary in the anteroom. Someone else was waiting there too — one of the black priests from the temple of the Ancient Ones. The scrawny, sallow, nervous little man looked almost fearfully at the American. Gary guessed this was Bator.

As Gary went out into the dusky corridor and back to his own apartment with Grauh and the guards, he wondered about Bator. If Dridim and his priests hated Shirani as much as they had seemed to, why was one of them visiting the princess secretly tonight? He puzzled over it until he fell asleep.

8. *Plotters in the Palace*

When Gary awoke, sunlight was streaming in. On the couch in the opposite corner of the stone room, Borchoff was snoring loudly. Sitting silently on the floor, watching him, was a small, Buddha-like figure.

"Okara!" Gary exclaimed surprizedly, getting to his feet. Then he said harshly, "What are you doing here? I thought you were plotting with Jhulun."

"I was," Okara admitted. The Japanese spy's voice and yellow face were quite calm. "But my plotting did not succeed."

Borchoff had awakened and was sitting up, rubbing his eyes. And Joan Laird, roused by their voices, came out of the connecting room, looking like a sleepy, tousled youth in her boyish, silken attire.

"We four," Okara continued calmly, "have been rivals until now, struggling against each other for our separate countries. We must not be rivals any longer. We must work together, for a common end."

"Ho! ho!" guffawed Borchoff. "You must think we are very simple, Okara, to be taken in by such a proposal. You have failed with this Jhulun, and now you think *we* will help you further the cause of Japan."

They all three looked at the little Japanese with hostility and suspicion. But his mask-like face did not change.

"You have reason to mistrust me," he said quietly, "but this is not a trick. We all now have the same purpose to achieve, whether you believe it or not.

"Each of us," Okara continued, "came here to seek out Shirani, each hoping to make her, and the superstitious nomad hordes awaiting her, a tool of his own country; each of us except you, Martin, who came for America to stop her from going forth at all. You alone of us were right, Martin. Shirani cannot be made a tool of any of our intriguing nations, I know now. And if she goes forth as she plans, it means a nomad scourge sweeping over Asia, threatening the interests of all our countries. Therefore we must stop Shirani's plan!"

"This is a mighty sudden change of outlook on your part, Okara," Gary said suspiciously. "Twenty-four hours ago you were doing everything you could to ingratiate yourself with Jhulun and Shirani."

"I was," Okara admitted coolly. "But since then I have learned enough from Jhulun to see that this wildcat princess could never be made subservient to Japan.

"When we arrived here yesterday," he added, "I got Jhulun to keep me with him by whispering to him that I could tell him all about the inimical intentions of you three toward his princess."

"Your usual double-cross, eh?" Gary rasped. "Go ahead, Okara."

"Jhulun seized at that," the little Japanese continued calmly, "and took me to his apartments, where we talked. I assured him that my nation was one of the greatest of the outside world, and I suggested strongly that when Shirani went forth and assumed leadership of the nomad peoples, she should ally herself to my nation, Japan. But Jhulun simply laughed at my suggestion. He said it was impossible, because by the time Shirani went forth from Koom, my nation and all the other nations of earth would lie wrecked and prostrate! He, and everyone else here, believes that if Shirani can gain access to their mysterious Place of Power, she can cause some great catastrophe that will shake all the nations of the outer world to ruins."

"Do you remember the Tibetan lama?" Joan exclaimed suddenly. "The one who prophesied in the nomad camp that before Shirani came forth from Koom, she would bring about an awful destruction that would shatter all the unbelieving nations?"

Gary nodded. "Shirani is firmly convinced that she can do something of the kind if she can gain entrance to the Place of Power. She told me so when I tried vainly to talk her out of her scheme of conquest, last night."

"What the devil is this Place of Power they talk about?" demanded Borchoff, perplexed.

"Jhulun didn't tell me much about it," Okara said thoughtfully. "I gather that it's a sacred shrine of some kind deep under that big volcano beside the fire sea. He said that the Place of Power is the 'great keystone of the world's structure,' whatever that may mean. The Ancient Ones, he said, once long ago used the place to work vast changes in the earth's surface, and the instruments or forces they used are still there."

"And who were the Ancient Ones?" Borchoff demanded in turn. "These cursed people talk in riddles."

"The Ancient Ones," Okara explained, "are supposed to be an alien, pre-human race of great power and wisdom, who inhabited this valley ages ago. Jhulun said they chose this place for their home because here lies the 'keystone of the world,' their Place of Power."

"We've got more to worry about than the superstitions of these Koomians," Gary rasped. "You say, Okara, that you are now convinced that Shirani won't become an ally or tool of any nation?"

"I am certain she won't," the Japanese asserted, "since she has this superstitious belief that she can use the powers of the Ancient Ones to cast down all the nations. Shirani will go through some kind of magical ceremony in their Place of Power, once she gets the key to it. And then, superstitiously confident that the nations can no longer resist her, she will go out and lead those millions of Mongols and Tibetans and all the other nomads, in a wave of war across Asia!

"I say it is the duty of all four of us to stop her," Okara continued solemnly. "And I give you the word of a samurai, in which even you will believe, that this is no trick on my part."

Borchoff scratched his head, his round, rubicund face thoughtful. "Okara is talking sense," he admitted. "None of us can make this princess subservient to our countries, so we ought to throw in together and keep her from leading a scourge of nomads across the continent."

"I'm with you," Joan said instantly, her stubborn chin firm with determination.

They looked expectantly at Gary, who had a frown on his lean, tanned face.

"Shirani's plans must be thwarted," he agreed thoughtfully. "That's the very mission on which I was sent here, and I am willing to join forces with the rest of you to accomplish it. But I don't see *how* we can accomplish it. We are just three men and a girl, unarmed and practically imprisoned."

OKARA's face set hard. "There is one way, and only one way, by which we can keep Shirani from ever going forth. We must kill her."

"Kill Shirani?" Gary exclaimed, stiffening. "Why, that would be murder—we couldn't——"

"Would it not be murder that would take place if Shirani led the nomad hordes across Asia?" Okara demanded fiercely. "Is it not murder she plans—murder of everyone in the outside world who resists her?"

"I know, but to kill her—ourselves," Gary said, aghast. "No, there must be some other way."

"There is no other way!" Okara said inflexibly. "Can we four hope to halt her by force, she who has thousands of warriors around her? Can we talk her out of the thing she has been planning for so long? You know we can't, Martin—you just admitted you couldn't dissuade her from her scheme of conquest. You *know* we can stop her only by killing her.

"Once Shirani is dead," the Japanese went on rapidly, "the danger will be gone. For it is only Shirani who has inflamed these people of Koom with a desire to emerge from the valley, against the warnings of their priests. It is only Shirani whom the fierce nomad millions of Central Asia are now awaiting. When Shirani dies, the danger dies with her."

"But you're talking about *murder!*" Gary exclaimed. "Princess or no princess, she is still just a girl."

"You're in love with her—that's why you defend her!" Joan cried angrily, her brown eyes hot with accusation.

"I'm not!" Gary denied. "But I'm not willing to murder her."

"And you are the spy who had no use for chivalry or sentiment!" Joan taunted. "Why, this Shirani whom you're defending believes that she can shake and shatter all Earth's nations, if she can gain access to their Place of Power, and she would do that, if such a power really existed!"

Gary Martin could find no answer to

the English girl's indictment. He stared miserably past them.

Okara's slant eyes bored into Gary's face. The little Japanese spoke solemnly.

"Martin, you were sent here by America, for the sake of your country, were you not? To save America and the world from the war and chaos that would ensue if this princess became the leader of the wild nomad hordes? Tell me, then, what is your duty to *America* in this situation? What would your superior officers tell you to do, if they could speak to you now?"

Gary's heart went cold. For Okara's words brought back with terrible vividness those last instructions William Cray had given him in sending him on the mission to secret Koom.

"You've got to stop this woman from disrupting the peace of the world, Gary. You've got to *kill* her, if necessary."

Cray's words were ringing in his ears, now. He knew only too well what Cray would tell him to do if he were here, what his duty was.

Yet to murder Shirani of the sun-bright hair, to strike down for ever that gay, fearless, flaming life——

"Isn't there any other way we can stop Shirani than by killing her?" Gary asked desperately.

"You know there is no other way," Okara declared inflexibly.

Gary went to the window, resting his burning face against the cold stone wall, looking out with haggard, unseeing eyes at the sunlit black city. But it was not Koom he saw, but the colorless face of William Cray, pale, steady eyes staring into his own. He could still hear Cray's high, desperate voice, just as he had heard it that night.

"I'm depending on you, Gary. America is depending on you, to save the peace of the world!"

Gary turned. His lean face was drawn, his eyes tortured, and his voice seemed to his own ears to come from far away.

"I will help you to kill Shirani," he said, his voice low. "It has to be done."

"Now you are talking!" approved Borchoff jovially, patting him on the shoulder. Gary fiercely flung away the Russian's hand.

"Don't praise me for it, damn you!" he exclaimed savagely.

Joan was watching him, her brown eyes aching with sudden emotion. But Gary turned harshly to Okara.

"I don't see how we're going to accomplish it, anyway. How can we get out of here, and into Shirani's guarded apartment, without weapons?"

"We have these for weapons," Okara said quickly, taking two daggers from inside his tunic. He added coolly, "Jhulun gave me these when he transferred me here this morning—to kill you three with."

"I'll be damned!" Borchoff exploded. "This Japanese is the devil himself."

Okara continued rapidly, "We can make a rope of strips from these rugs, and late tonight we can slide down the rope to the window of the rooms below these. From them, we can get to Shirani's apartments, overcome the guards outside them in a surprize attack, and penetrate inside and kill the princess."

"And then?" Gary asked.

Okara shrugged. "Then our work will be done. We will try to steal horses and escape down the valley and out the tunnel by which we came here. Whether we escape or not, the danger of Shirani will be gone."

The little Japanese looked at Joan. "You had better stay here while we three make the attempt," he told the English girl. "You would only lessen our chances by accompanying us. If we succeed, we will come back below and signal you to come down the rope and escape with us."

Joan nodded, her eyes wistfully watching Gary. His tanned face was a bitter, brooding mask.

NIGHT'S blackness came down on Koom, that evening, after what to Gary seemed endless eternities of waiting. He had paced the rooms restlessly all that day, trying to keep his mind on what he knew was his stern duty. But Shirani's laughing eyes constantly intruded. He was strangely thankful that she had sent word that morning that she would be too occupied to see him again until the next day.

Now as the night hours wore away, with the trembling glow from the stupendous fire sea painting the wall of their dark room, the palace and the city became gradually silent in sleep. At last there was no sound but the restless movements of the guards posted outside their door.

Okara rose soundlessly, signaling to them. They went to the open window with the rough rope they had knotted of strips torn from the woolen rugs. After tying its end to a heavy table, they threw out the rope. It dangled down in the darkness along the vast black wall.

The little Japanese went down the rope first, nimbly as a monkey, clutching one of the daggers. Gary followed, the other knife in his hand. As he slid silently down the red-lit black wall, he looked up and saw Joan's white face looking down after him, pale and taut.

Hand over hand, Gary descended until he was abreast of the open window of the room below. He swung easily into the dark chamber and stood beside Okara. The room was unoccupied, as they had expected after hearing no sound from it through the day. They waited in the darkness until Borchoff's huge form slid clumsily down and joined them.

"You know the way to Shirani's apartment," Okara whispered to Gary in the dark. "You must lead us."

"All right—keep close to me," Gary rasped. His pulses were hammering like pounding sledges.

He opened the door that led into the corridor, a narrow hall dimly lit by a few silver hanging lamps. It was deserted.

"Come on," Gary muttered.

The daggers of Okara and himself gleamed wickedly in the lamplight as they stole through the dim black corridors. Borchoff stalked behind them, his huge hands balled into mighty fists, his small, twinkling eyes very alert in his red face.

The vast palace slept. They went through shadowy corridors and halls without meeting a soul, until they approached the entrance to Shirani's apartments. There, in the anteroom to her suite, they saw the two silver-armored guards habitually posted there. The two Koomians were chatting idly, one with his back turned to the corridor.

"Now!" whispered Gary, and he and his two companions leaped into the dim-lit anteroom.

Okara's dagger flashed like striking lightning as he jumped. The guard with his back to them sank down, stabbed in the neck. The other guard, who had faced them and had a second's more warning, ripped out his sword and stabbed wildly at Gary and Borchoff.

"Hell!" grunted the Russian as the glittering blade tore into his side.

Before the Koomian could withdraw it, before either Gary or Okara could spring to help their comrade, Borchoff had seized the neck of the guard in his huge hands. The Russian squeezed with terrible strength, his round face flaming with the convulsive effort. There was a dull, snapping sound. The guard sank lifeless to the floor, his neck broken.

Borchoff staggered, his flaming red

face suddenly drained of color, his little eyes filming.

"Got me," he grunted, tugging out the sword from his side. A rush of blood followed it. "Got——"

He collapsed heavily to the floor, blood pouring from his side. Gary and Okara stooped over him. His small eyes cleared for a moment as he looked up at the two, and a faint grin flickered in them.

"My—my last round of the great game," he whispered thickly. "You two —carry on——"

His head rolled heavily to one side.

"Dead!" the Japanese whispered, his slant eyes glittering. He straightened. "One of us must watch here, while the other goes in and kills the princess. Martin, you know your way in her apartments and I don't, so——"

"So I'm elected?" Gary said hoarsely. He stared shakenly at Borchoff's unmoving body, then straightened, gripping his dagger. "All right, Okara, I'll do it. And you needn't fear now that I'll back out."

"One quick stab will be enough," Okara said. "Be swift!"

Gary pushed silently into the chambers beyond the anteroom. The high-ceilinged, silk-hung stone rooms of Shirani were dark, except for the shaking red fire-glow from the windows. There was no sound.

Gary's nerves were strung to harp-like pitch as he stole softly through the rooms. A fierce, unshakable resolve possessed him now, an iron determination to complete the mission in which Borchoff had given his life. Shirani had to die, this night, for the peace of the world!

He entered a room where a sputtering silver lamp cast soft white light. The brilliant silken rugs and the dainty, carven furniture breathed femininity. An exquisite, intangible perfume haunted this chamber. And then he saw Shirani.

She lay sleeping on a couch beyond the lamp, a slim huddled figure in white silk, looking as though she had fallen asleep waiting for someone. Gary tiptoed over to her side and bent over her, gripping the dagger.

Shirani was beautiful in sleep. Her gold hair was spread carelessly on the pillow, her face relaxed in tender, childish lines, her red lips a little parted. One hand was unconsciously doubled into a little fist. The loosened collar of her silk tunic revealed warm, white, shapely shoulders, and one high, rosy little breast.

Gary's hand was quivering violently as he raised the gleaming dagger.

"God forgive me—I've *got* to do it," he whispered.

Shirani opened her eyes.

Gary knew instantly that his unconscious whisper had awakened her. He saw her stare up at him with sleep-clouded eyes.

"Has Bator come yet to——" she started to ask sleepily. Then her clearing gaze recognized Gary, saw his uplifted dagger. He was ready to drive it down into her breast before she could cry out. But Shirani did not attempt any cry. She lay looking up at him, her blue eyes wide, amazed, but fearless.

"Gary!" she whispered. "You have come to kill me!"

"Yes!" he rasped. Sweat was standing out on his brow, his lean face was terrible in the lamplight. "I've got to, Shirani—my duty to the world,—the world you'll plunge into war and chaos if you live!"

Still there was not a shadow of fear in her wonderful eyes. It seemed to Gary that her soul looked up out of them into his.

"Gary, you cannot kill me," she said steadily. "You love me—I know it. And I have loved you, from the first."

"A trick," he muttered savagely.

"Do I deal in tricks?" she flamed. "Do you think I would lie and cringe to save

my life? Gary, you *know* me better than that."

Shirani's eyes, completely ignoring the menace of the uplifted dagger, clung with wistful tenderness to his dark face.

"Gary, if you can say truthfully that you have no love for me, then you may drive that dagger home without further word from me."

And Shirani looked up at him with calm confidence, smiling as fearlessly as a child. Gary felt his whole being shaken wildly.

"I do love you, Shirani!" he said thickly. "Whether it's real love, or wild infatuation, or what, it's there in me. But I've *got* to think of the hell you'll start in the world, if you're left living."

A FAINT new hope flickered up suddenly in his haggard gray eyes.

"Shirani, if I do not kill you, will you promise to give up your mad scheme of conquest, and remain here in Koom?"

"No!" Shirani answered swiftly, her beautiful face inflexible. "Gary, no one, not even you, whom I love, can make me change my plans through fear. If I die now, I die, but while I live, I'll follow the road of adventure and conquest on which I have set my feet. I shall lead the nomad hosts to conquest of the broken, shattered world, if I live! Yes, for the world *will* be shattered by my hand, before ever I leave this valley, once I have won to the Place of Power. You do not believe that, Gary, but it is true, and I speak the whole truth to you even now when you threaten me with death."

"Then if nothing will alter your wild plans, you've—you've got to die," Gary said hoarsely, his eyes dilated.

And the dagger in his hand came down toward her. Shirani made no move to stay it, her eyes fixed on his. The keen point touched the soft, warm skin between her breasts—and hesitated there.

Gary's whole frame was trembling, as he sought for the power to drive the blade into her body. He couldn't do it! His fingers gripped the dagger hilt until his knuckles showed white, and yet his arm *couldn't* move!

And then Shirani softly reached up with outspread arms and clasped his shoulders, her beautiful face throbbing with tender, clinging passion.

"Gary, my love," she whispered.

The dagger clattered on the floor. And Gary held her silken, pulsing body in his arms. Her lips were living flame against his, the exquisite perfume of her hair in his nostrils, her breasts throbbing wildly against his heart.

"God help me!" he whispered, as his dark head drew back.

Shirani cupped his face between her hands, gazing into it with yearning tenderness.

"Gary," she said vibrantly, "when first I saw you, I knew this was fated."

"I'm a traitor," he muttered thickly. "To my companions, to my country. I've betrayed them all——"

"Yes, you are a traitor!" said a harsh, guttural voice. "But your treachery shall not save this woman."

Gary spun. It was Okara, his slant eyes flaming accusingly at the American, glittering hate at the Koomian princess.

"I should have known you were too enamored of the woman to kill her," Okara muttered. "But *I* am not!"

The Japanese started forward, a bloody sword he had taken from the dead guard gleaming terribly in his hand.

"Wait, Okara!" Gary cried desperately. "We can't kill Shirani—I thought we could, but we can't! We'll escape as we planned and warn our countries—baffle her plans in that way——"

Okara was not even listening, but coming forward with grim purpose in every line of his mask-like yellow face.

There was suddenly a wild, terrified yell from the doorway. The scrawny, nervous little black-robed priest Bator, who had visited Shirani the preceding night, stood in that door, his eyes bulging.

He yelled again, even as Okara whirled toward him. The Japanesee, seeing he was too late to silence the priest, spun back to rush toward Shirani and Gary.

But there was a rush of feet and shouting of alarmed voices. A javelin flashed into the room and through Okara's sword-arm, and a half-dozen silver-armored guards poured in.

9. *The Tomb of the Ancient Ones*

THE guards rushed forward with drawn swords upon Okara and Gary. The little black priest Bator had shrunk fearfully into a corner of the chamber.

"Stop!" pealed Shirani's voice.

It brought the fierce silver warriors to a halt with swords uplifted.

"Shall we not slay these strangers?" their captain demanded. "They have killed the two guards outside, and surely they came hither to murder you, princess!"

"This one," said Shirani, indicating Okara, "would have killed me, yes. But this other saved me." Her hand rested on Gary's arm.

"Take the slant-eyed one back to his quarters and see that he does not escape again," she ordered rapidly. "I will give judgment on him later."

Okara's yellow face was a mask of bitterness as he looked at Gary's torn countenance.

"We have failed, Martin," said the little Japanese burningly, "because of you and your passion. I hope that passion comforts you for your betrayal of your country, when this evil witch plunges the world into war."

He went out with the guards. But every word had sunk into Gary's soul.

"Heed not the slant-eyed one," Shirani said quickly.

"He's right," Gary said hoarsely. "I did betray him and Borchoff. But I couldn't kill you, Shirani—couldn't murder you this way. I'd give my own life to keep you from destroying the peace of the world, but I couldn't take yours. I'm a spy, but not an assassin."

"Princess!" whispered a fearful, husky voice.

Shirani wheeled. It was the nervous little priest Bator, who had come out of the corner when the guards left.

"So you have finally come, Bator!" Shirani exclaimed, her eyes lighting. "For hours tonight I have been awaiting you—so long that I fell asleep."

She leaned eagerly, tensely toward him. "Have you brought it, Bator?"

"Yes, princess." Bator's voice was thick with emotion, and his eyes were rolling in almost overpowering fear. "Yes, I have committed the greatest sin in this world, and have stolen the thing you desire. I, a priest of the Ancient Ones, have committed that ultimate sacrilege."

"Where is it, then?" Shirani cried with almost unbearable eagerness.

The little priest drew something out of his robe. His face was paper-white, his hand shaking violently, as he handed it to her.

Gary saw that the object was a small golden tube, with a lens of quartz at one end. It looked like a modern flashlight, but had been worn smooth by many hands in immeasurable ages of time.

"The key to the Place of Power!" cried Shirani, her eyes blazing up in exultation as she grasped it.

"Yes, it is the sacred key that unlocks the way to the Place of Power," gasped Bator. "I stole it from Dridim tonight, while he slept. Yes, I, a priest of the

temple, dared do that, and now I almost wish that I had died before I sinned thus against the law of the Ancient Ones."

"Did I not promise you limitless riches and power if you stole the key for me?" exclaimed Shirani. "You have naught to fear, man. This very night, now, I shall go to the Place of Power to see if this is truly the key, and if it is, if you have not tried to trick me, you shall be second to none in the great empire which this key will win for me."

"Better had it been for me had I never listened to your honeyed promises of power, princess," moaned Bator. "If Dridim suspects——"

"He will not suspect, if you return at once to the temple and pretend ignorance when he discovers his loss," Shirani said impatiently. "Go now, and be sure that my promises will be fulfilled."

The little priest left, a conscience-stricken, pitiful figure who seemed hardly able to stand.

Shirani's face flared with intense emotion as she gripped the golden tube with fiercely possessive fingers.

"I *told* Dridim I should get the key, one way or another!" she exclaimed. "Unless Bator has tricked me, unless this is but a counterfeit, the power to shake and shatter the whole earth is in my grasp!"

Her eyes flashed at Gary's bewildered face. "Gary, we go now to the Place of Power, to make sure that this is indeed the key. Once I am sure of that, my plans vault quickly to their climax."

She added, "The way is perilous. You need not come unless you wish."

"I'll go with you, Shirani," he said quickly. For strong hope was surging up again in Gary's mind. Once Shirani had at last penetrated the superstitiously reverenced shrine of these people, the mysterious Place of Power, once she had discovered that the legended, world-shaking powers it was supposed to contain had no existence, *then* she could be dissuaded from her mad plan of world conquest, Gary thought.

So he meant to be with her when she learned that her superstitious beliefs had no foundation, that there were no such vast powers as she hoped to control. In her disappointment, Gary knew, Shirani might at last be turned from her warlike purposes.

SHIRANI hung a small silver lamp to her belt and then tugged Gary excitedly toward the door. They found the anteroom empty, the bodies of Borchoff and the slain guards having been removed. Shirani had thrust the golden tube into her belt beside her dagger, and her hand clung pulsingly to Gary's as they went down through the sleeping palace.

They emerged into the dark courts behind it, where watchful guards instantly challenged them, and then saluted as they recognized Shirani. Horses were quickly brought at her order. They mounted and rode out around the palace, Shirani leading the way at a quick gallop.

Koom brooded darkly in sleep about them, under the shaking red rays of the fire lake and the paler radiance of the moon. The palace behind them was a vast, lightless pile, and far across the plaza, the massive octagonal temple of the Ancient Ones loomed dark and strange.

"There sleeps Dridim, dreaming that he has baffled me!" laughed Shirani. "It is a rude awakening he will have."

They clattered quickly through almost deserted dark streets. Then they were out of the city, riding toward the fiery sea.

Gary's eyes were almost dazzled by the evil vermilion splendor of the restless molten sea, seen this close in the darkness. Its heavy waves of liquid lava stretched in sullen brilliance to the dark,

frowning mass of the volcano from which fell the wonderful fire cataract.

Shirani led the way at a quick gallop along the shore of the burning lake, heading around its curve toward the volcano behind it. The fierce heat and sulfurous smokes from the living lava made Gary gasp. The horses, accustomed to the fiery sea, moved without apparent fear.

Soon they had curved far around the shore of the lava sea, and now beside them the sheer, vertical wall of the immense volcano rose abruptly, separated from the fiery sea only by a narrow rock ledge. Over this ledge, which was barely wide enough for the two of them to ride abreast, Shirani led intrepidly.

Gary saw ahead of them now the awful cataract of the fiery niagara, that tumbled down from high above and fell into the burning lake, a score of yards out from the ledge. The dim thunder of that awful torrent of falling lava had increased, as they advanced, into a nerve-racking, rumbling roar.

"Do we go under the cataract itself?" he cried to Shirani.

Shirani nodded as she spurred forward. "There is no danger, Gary," she shouted. "None of the lava will fall upon us."

Yet Gary felt a quaking of his soul as they rode forward. The horses were going unwillingly now. The crash of those thousands of tons of molten rock each moment, pouring out of the crevice high above and overshooting the ledge below, was stupefying.

Shirani spurred boldly on, and Gary set his teeth and followed. The horses were plunging perilously in panic as they neared the thundering lava cataract. Then they rode right under the falling niagara of lava. The roar of it was terrible, dazing. The whole world about them seemed belching fire. Gary's cheeks burned from fine fire-spray as he tried to control his rearing, panicky steed.

"This way, Gary!" pealed Shirani's voice through the stunning roar.

Gary perceived that she had ridden her horse right into an opening in the sheer rock wall of the volcano. He followed blindly.

He dimly saw a high, square doorway carved in the rock, bordered by strange designs crumbling from incalculable age. He urged his frightened horse through it, and found himself suddenly out of the full blast of the roar, and in a large, firelit tunnel.

"Dismount, Gary; we leave our horses here," came Shirani's voice beside him. He saw she had already climbed down.

"I wouldn't want to come *that* way every day!" gasped Gary as he dismounted. He stared with bewildered curiosity around him.

The tunnel was twenty feet square in cross-section. Its sides were smoothed with more than human exactitude from the volcano's rock. There was no light except the flare from the falling fire cataract outside its mouth. The great passageway led downward, curving sharply a few dozen yards away.

"This way was hollowed out by the Ancient Ones, long ages ago," Shirani told him. "It leads down through many caverns to the place which is the hidden keystone of the earth, the Place of Power."

She added, "The Ancient Ones, when the last of them wearied finally of living, trooped down into these caverns to die. Yes, I have seen and you shall soon see the great cavern that is the Tomb of the Ancient Ones, and in which they lay down ages ago and passed calmly out of life."

Gary felt dazed. The awful way they had come, this tunnel that gave evidence of having been hollowed in past eons by

unhuman hands—these things had started strange doubts in his soul.

What if there really *was* a Place of Power, a keystone of the earth's crustal structure, where forces could be applied that would shake and shatter all earth's surface? His mind recoiled from that fearful suggestion, and he told himself fiercely that his imagination was getting the best of him. It couldn't be possible, such a thing!

Shirani had lit the silver lamp she had brought with her. "We shall have no other light in some of these passages," she told him. "Now keep close beside me, Gary, for this way is not without peril. Yes, even I have no love for it, though more than once in the past I have come down here as far as the Tomb of the Ancient Ones."

"Lead on, Shirani," he told her, determinedly. She flashed a warm smile at him, and then started.

The tunnel, curving to the right and downward, soon became pitch-dark as the glow of the cataract was left behind. The roar of it faded from their ears as they went.

But Gary heard other sounds, dim, ominous ones, as they went on, a murmuring and rustling and quivering, of the mighty forces at work in the volcano around them. And the air was stifling hot and close.

For half an hour they followed the winding tunnel downward, their only light the feeble glow of Shirani's lamp. Then the tunnel emerged as a gallery hewn from the side of a narrow, terrible chasm. In that chasm was a thing appalling to Gary's unprepared eyes.

A colossal fountain of fire! A huge jet of molten lava spurting straight up from far below, driving up through the chasm close beside them into the shadowy, unguessable spaces above, casting wild light over the sheer, rocky walls. And none of that fountaining lava fell back!

"It is what feeds the cataract that falls from high above, outside," Shirani cried over the dull thunder of the thing.

"Lead on," Gary shouted, a little thickly.

THE passage left the side of that chasm of the fire fountain, and again became a downward-winding tunnel cut from solid rock. Gary's mind reeled as he followed Shirani. The suffocating heat, the sulfurous air, the constant ominous whispering and rustling and creaking of the vast volcano, were overpowering.

They came to a great crack across the tunnel, crossed by a massive stone bridge. Looking down from it, Gary saw a blazing current of lava rushing with unbelievable speed ten feet underneath. As they went on, he guessed that by now they must be far down in these flame-shot spaces, well beneath the level of the fiery sea. They were now again traversing a dark, unbroken stretch of the tunnel.

"The cavern in which lie the dead Ancient Ones is close ahead, Gary," Shirani told him eagerly. "And in their cavern-tomb is the door that leads to the Place of Power—the door this key will open!"

The tunnel leveled, ran straight as a spear for a hundred yards. Then it debouched into a vast, black cavern utterly without light. The feeble glow of Shirani's silver lamp illuminated only the nearer parts of that dark, enormous fane.

Gary looked into the somber place in awe. He saw that the floor of the cavern had been smoothed to exact flatness. And as Shirani held up the lamp, he saw that the walls also of this great cave, towering a hundred feet at least, had been smoothed into great planes and facets of mathematical regularity.

"The Tomb of the Ancient Ones!" exclaimed Shirani, involuntary awe in her voice. "See, there they lie, each in his place, just as they long ago lay wearily down to die."

"God!" whispered Gary, staring. "Those creatures—unhuman——"

This weird cavern was a vast mortuary. Ranged in it were rows on rows of enormous, rectangular blocks of black stone, each of them perfectly squared and over six feet in height. And upon the flat top of each great block lay stretched a motionless body. They were not human bodies—glimpsed imperfectly as they were by the feeble glow of the little lamp, Gary could see that these dead creatures had never been remotely akin to humanity. Their bodies were dimly like the human in shape, with two long lower limbs, two folded arms, and a bulbous head. But they were of huge size, must have stood ten feet in height, in life. And they appeared to be of dark *mineral* flesh.

Their flesh had the dark mineral gleam of stone, though apparently it had been flexible in life. The eyes he could vaguely perceive in their heads were glassy, hard ones like faceted crystals. Dimly into Gary's mind came apprehension that these creatures had been of a wholly different line of life from any that man knew, that the basis of their strange life must have been one, not of carbon, but of silicon. They had lived in the remote past of Earth.

"The Ancient Ones—the great ones who were before man was, and who had wisdom and power that man has never attained," Shirani was whispering. "Yet were they friendly to man, and taught him much, until the human peoples became so wicked that the Ancient Ones destroyed their civilizations, by using the Place of Power to shake and shatter the earth. Here, Gary, you see the last hundreds of their great race, the final generation of them that in the end became so weary of long life and power that they died by choice, here in this cavern they had prepared to be their tomb."

Then Shirani started eagerly forward, and her voice rose silvery with excitement into the gloomy cavern.

"Come, Gary! At the end of this cavern-tomb lies the door that this key will open—the door to the Place of Power!"

"The Place of Power?" Gary repeated as he followed her forward. Sudden, shocking realization swept over him.

"Good God!" he exclaimed. "If these Ancient Ones existed, as I see now they did, then the Place of Power you told of must exist also—the powers over Earth you told me of must be real——"

The tremendous implications of that thought staggered his lips to silence. All his mental bearings had been overturned.

For the first time, now, Gary began to *believe*—to believe that down here there *was* a keystone of Earth's structure in which forces could be loosed to rock the whole surface of Earth. And if that were so, if Shirani really was about to take possession of such a power—his mind rioted with the wild picture of what would happen if she used it as she planned. The whole earth quaking, the cities of the nations falling to wreck, modern civilization shattered in an hour! And then the sweep outward of Shirani and the savage nomad millions who were even now awaiting her.

"Come, Gary!" Shirani's voice throbbed with eagerness. "I have waited long for this hour!"

She was hurrying down the length of the colossal mortuary cavern. He followed her, stumbling dazedly between the long rows of somber blocks upon which the stony, unhuman bodies of the Ancient Ones lay.

Shirani stopped, a dozen feet from the

farther end of the cavern. And Gary stopped too, shaken by new shock of surprize. Shirani had set the lamp down, and clutching the golden tube in her hand, was pointing forward with wild eagerness.

"The door to the Place of Power!" she cried, her eyes blazing in the dim lamplight.

"The door?" Gary repeated stupidly, staring wildly.

In the rock end-wall of the cavern was set a huge double door of gleaming silvery metal. Fifty feet high towered the great leaves of it, and they were twenty feet across.

There was no knob or hold of any kind upon the blank silvery surface of the doors. The only aperture in them was a tiny, needle-like hole six feet from the floor.

"At last," Shirani's voice flared, "I stand before these doors with the key to them in my hand! No force on Earth could break through those doors, Gary—only this key can open them."

"You shall never open them, blasphemers!"

That wild, fierce cry came from behind them. They whirled around, were rooted by sheer amazement. Running toward them from the entrance of the cavern, stumbling in panting haste between the solemn funeral-piers of the Ancient Ones, a lamp in his hand, came the black-robed man who had shouted.

"Dridim!" cried Shirani, lightnings blazing up in her eyes.

"Yes, it is Dridim, the high priest of the Ancient Ones whose law you seek to break!" cried the priest, panting with haste and hate as he came toward them.

He stopped and raised his hands in an imprecatory, awful gesture. His white face was terrible in its hate.

"You have committed the ultimate sin!" he thundered at Shirani. "You have stolen the sacred key you now hold in your hand! Yes, when I awoke and found the key gone, I knew you had taken it and I knew that I would find you here."

His hand dipped into his black robe and a dagger flashed forth. "Now, blaspheming princess, you die for your awful sacrilege! And your outland lover dies with you!"

Dridim started forward. But Shirani, blue eyes flaring lightnings of rage, moved first.

She leaped with the swiftness of a white tigress, drawing her own dagger from her belt. Gary cried out hoarsely—then saw Dridim reel backward, clutching his breast.

The high priest swayed, stupefied for the moment by the swiftness of that mortal wound, staring down unbelievingly at his bleeding breast. Then, swaying and tottering, he raised awful eyes to Shirani.

"You have added sin to sin," he choked to the quivering princess. "You have slain the high priest of the Ancient Ones in their very presence, to further your mad ambition."

His body stiffened for a moment, his pale eyes flamed, his voice swelled to almost superhuman intensity.

"Hear me, Shirani!" he cried. "You have sought to ride to power through death and sin—I prophesy that for your sin you shall reap but dreadful death yourself."

His terrible eyes widened. "Yes, I seem to see an awful death creep upon you—out of this very tomb——"

DRIDIM tottered sidewise and crashed to the stone floor, dead. But his empty eyes still seemed to glare up at them.

Shirani pressed close to Gary, her whole figure trembling violently. She flung her bloody dagger away.

"Gary!" she gasped. "For a moment I too seemed to see what Dridim saw—a dark peril coming out of this cavern upon me——"

Then she stiffened, raised her head royally. "He would have slain me—and you, too!" she exclaimed. "I gave him only what he sought to deal to us."

"Shirani, let's get out of this hellish place!" urged Gary wildly. "I feel something terrible brooding here——"

"We shall go, Gary—but first I will open the doors and enter the Place of Power!" Shirani insisted. "I will make sure that the forces used by the Ancient Ones to shake the earth are still here, ready to be used soon by me."

She stepped over Dridim's prone body toward the huge silvery doors, grasping the golden tube. Gary followed her. And then, as Shirani reached the great doors, a thing happened that was more terrible to Gary than anything that had gone before.

A deep, mighty voice, strange and alien in its heavy accents, spoke from the rock wall somewhere above the doors. It was no human voice, yet it spoke an ancient form of the language of Koom.

"Oh ye who seek to open these doors —*beware!*"

Wildly they looked at each other, as the mighty voice rolled into silence in which a whispering echo reverberated faintly.

"Beware—beware——" whispered that echo.

Shirani suddenly pointed up. "See, the voice comes from that opening! It is a device set here by the Ancient Ones, to dissuade any who might seek without reason to open these doors!"

Gary looked up and saw the round opening in the rock above the doors, and realized that she was right, that it was merely a mechanical warning installed here ages ago by the Ancient Ones. Yet his nerves thrilled like harp-strings to that whispering, fading echo all around them.

"Beware——"

Shirani was undauntedly pointing the golden tube at the tiny needle-hole in the doors. She touched a stud upon the tube. A thin thread of white light leaped out of it and into the tiny hole. Then it ceased. There was no visible change for five heart-beats. Then:

"The doors open, Gary!"

Softly, silently, as though upon hinges oiled but yesterday, the mighty doors were swinging inward. And from beyond those doors, a terrific blaze of awful firelight struck blindingly upon their eyes, wildly illuminating all the dark cavern-tomb.

Their dazzled eyes looked through the open doors into a raging hell of glowing light. And upon their ears, shattering the solemn silence, beat a thunderous, unceasing din and roar as of the crashing and creating of worlds. It hammered louder, louder, on their stupefied senses as they started unsteadily through the doors into the Place of Power.

The stupendous events which threatened the world with weird destruction will be told in the thrilling chapters that bring this story to its end in next month's WEIRD TALES. We suggest that you reserve your copy at your news dealers now.

The Prophet Speaks

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

City forbanned by seer and god and devil!
In glory less than Tyre or fabled Ys,
But more than they in mere, surpassing evil!

Yea, black Atlantis, fallen beneath dim seas
For sinful lore and rites to demons done,
Bore not the weight of such iniquities!

Your altars with a primal foulness run,
Where the Worm hears the thousand-throated hymn. . . .
And all the sunsets write your malison,

And all the stars unrolled from heaven's rim
Declare the doom which I alone may read
In moving ciphers numberless and dim.

O city consecrate to crime and greed!
O scorner of the Muses' messenger!
Within your heart the hidden maggots breed.

Against your piers the nether seas confer;
Against your towers the typhons in their slumber
In sealed abysms darkly mutter and stir.

They dream the day when Earth shall disencumber
Her bosom of your sprawled and beetling piles;
When tides that bore your vessels without number

Shall turn your hills to foam-enshrouded isles,
And ebbing, leave but slime and desolation,
Ruin and rust, through all your riven miles.

On you shall fall a starker devastation
Than came upon Tuloom and Tarshish old,
In you shall dwell the last Abomination.

The dust of all your mansions and the mold
Shall move in changing mounds and clouds disparted
About the wingless air, the footless wold.

The sea, withdrawn from littorals desert-hearted,
Shall leave you to the silence of the sky—
A place fordone, forlorn, unnamed, uncharted,

Where naught molests the sluggish crotali.

The Witch in the Fog

By ALEXANDER FAUST

A brief tale of thuggee—and a beautiful English girl

IN HIS favorite chair at his favorite club, Mr. Blenheim Oranger enjoyed whisky-and-soda, a vista of Regent Street, and deep content of soul.

It had taken some years and quite a bit of cleverness to achieve all this.

He was holding the match to a cigar whose bland Sumatra fragrance added the final fillip, when Captain Jorgens, an old friend, sauntered in. "Hallo!" said Oranger, with almost the lazy purr of a cat.

Then Jorgens looked at him and paused.

Dread. Black dread, unreasoning and icy. Fingers squeezing his heart.

"Funny thing," Jorgens was remarking; "imagined I saw Elise Mayring stare at me out of the fog tonight."

Oranger's hand spilled half the whisky-and-soda over his collar. "Couldn't be," he said thickly. "Couldn't be Elise. She's in India." He said it wildly, assuring himself.

Jorgens glanced at him again, oddly. "I say, you're not looking too well. . . ."

Blenheim Oranger rose abruptly, leaving the other to stare and shake his head and shrug. Oranger took a cab to Oak Manse, his home. The cabby was a man who had driven him before; he made sure of that.

In the big old house where he did his stately and luxurious living, he selected a blue steel .38 automatic from his collection of weapons, tested the mechanism and replaced the clip with a fresh one. In his bedroom he waited. She would come; and he would be ready.

His gaze lingered on the huge casement of leaded glass. Beyond it lay lawn and trees and a street. He couldn't see the street now. A gray fist clutched London. Fog writhed beyond the window, a myriad of shapes leering at him out of its depths. One moment he thought a gray unwinking snake stared at him. Again, it seemed a squatting woman with four arms and a necklace of pale grinning skulls.

Oranger's strained eyes smarted, his throat was tight and arid. Just beyond the casement, tentacles of fog twisted into another form: a woman, slight and shapely with deep eyes, tip-tilted breasts and slender hands. Her ghostly fingers pressed against the pane. Her outlines were shimmering fog, but he could see the scarlet-tinged spot of her mouth, the

certainty of her chin above the long, lovely throat-line.

THE casement shivered and a tentacle of fog writhed in, weighting the air with sinister damp.

Blenheim Oranger grabbed the phone and demanded Scotland Yard.

Then somehow she stood before him, very beautiful in a robe of some gray silken stuff that shimmered like the fog that followed her and clung about her. Her hair was loose and lustrous, tumbling to her shoulders, caressing the pale even ivory of her arms. She swayed toward him with a faint susurration of silk. She glided with a long loose-hipped rhythm that held him spellbound, his gaze preferring the loveliness of her body to the cold sardonic fury in her eyes.

Then she was so close that he could scent her, not her old familiar fragrance of gardenia, but some frangipani-touched odor that was dark and exotic.

His eyes traveled up, past the gray silken handkerchief that dangled at her wrist, past the pallor of her throat to the dainty firm line of her chin, her mouth with heavy under-lip blood-red. Suddenly he was tense with eagerness for her and yet very much afraid.

"Elise!" he spoke the name in a tentative hoarse whisper.

His hand groped out to touch her.

Her wrist flickered and the gray handkerchief whispered through the air. Like a vicious insect, it stung him. He jerked back, and she laughed, the mellow sound of bells in ancient temples.

He touched a finger to his cheek. "Elise," he said again, wonderingly.

"I have come back," she said. "You shouldn't be too glad to see me."

"I am. I'm as mad about you as I always was."

"Odd way you showed it—to sell me to that beast!" The smile bared her teeth.

He said, deprecatingly, "That's hardly the way to put it, dear. He was a prince, and pure Aryan blood, though his skin was dark. And he married you. What better match could any guardian arrange?"

She said nothing, but her veiled eyes challenged his justification.

"But you and I are still cousins, and more than cousins," he went on. "Shouldn't our greeting be a little more —tender?"

"You think you've kissed me," she taunted. "In India they've studied the art. There was a thing or two my husband taught me . . . one was kissing."

She swayed closer. Her mouth was flame and honey against his, wounding him and soothing the wound sweetly.

He clung to her, burying his face in the whiteness of her shoulder. For a space the glint in her eyes became softer.

A thin impatient voice somewhere was reiterating, "Scotland Yard speaking! Are you there?"

The telephone, forgotten, lay beside its cradle.

Elise leaned away. "You knew I'd come—you called them to protect you!" she surmised with something of contempt.

Oranger picked up the phone and looked at it as though he had never seen one before. "Blenheim Oranger speaking," he said, twisting with embarrassment. "Uh—really, there's no need—it was all a mistake——"

"Don't break the connection," her murmur cut across his fumbling. "There was another thing my husband taught me." She flicked the gray silk of the handkerchief. "Like this. Tell them—you're going to be murdered!"

Oranger's mouth fell open and he tried to laugh. He saw the soft lines of her face flatten into harshness and a mystic cruel ecstasy. His damp hand gripped

the phone and he shouted, "Scotland Yard! I'm going to be——"

A harsh heavy voice blocked his terror:

"Drop that phone!"

His gaze darted up. A thick-set man whose beetling brows met across his nose was standing beside him. The man jabbed Oranger's ribs with one of those crude but deadly contraptions sometimes seen in England: a home-made pistol, an affair of springs and wood and wire that might blast murderously even before it was intended.

ORANGER relaxed with a sigh as if the air had been let out of him. Another man was now following the first, in through the window. He was armed with a small, womanish automatic, handled in mother-of-pearl. Strict laws made it hard to get guns, but somehow, they contrived. This second man was a slight figure with stringy knots of muscle and hollow cheeks. He turned his automatic to cover Elise.

Elise let the silken handkerchief dangle from her wrist. Deliberately, she walked toward the gun.

"Keep away, lady, or before God, I'll let you have it!" the thin man rasped. She laughed, stopped short. With that handkerchief, she had no reason to be afraid.

With infinite care, Oranger put the phone down beside its cradle. The thin irritated voice at the other end of the wire said again, "Are you there? Are you——"

Oranger lifted his hand carefully and wiped it across his upper lip where perspiration showed like a mustache of crystal beads. "What—what do you want?" he demanded.

The thick man shifted on his feet, from one to the other, and twisted his mouth in a dog-like snarl to utter:

"Didn't expect you'd 'ave a lady friend visitin' you, Mis-ter Oranger. But that don't make hany difference! We come to settle han old score with you."

"Score?" Oranger murmured faintly.

"And settle it with bullets!" the thin one cackled. He flourished the gun.

"We're out o' Dartmoor now. I said I'd come back!" There was triumph in the first man's voice.

"Dartmoor? Come back? What's that to do with me?" Oranger posed as a picture of irritated righteousness.

The thick man licked his lips ferociously. "Try a little, Mis-ter Oranger. You'll remember, you will. Remember 'ow you 'ired me hand Davey 'ere to pull a little job for you, hand 'ow you fixed it so's you'd collect the swag and we'd get sent hup! Both of us, seein' the sky through bars, four long years!"

Elise murmured, "Then I wasn't the only one you double-crossed, dear. You seem to have made a career of it!"

"He's insane!" Oranger said.

"Two thousand pounds worth o' stuff it was we 'elped you to," the big man continued, "hand never a farthing of it we got! You'll pay hup now! Hall of it!"

"Blackmail!" Oranger muttered darkly.

The thin one spoke, in his turn: "It'll be worse than blackmail. And you'll like it less. You won't like it at all!" He gestured with the gun.

Oranger wiped sweat again and bargained, "Suppose I haven't that much here?"

"We'll 'ave it hout of your 'ide!" the big man spat.

Elise laughed. She was enjoying his discomfort. There was in her flesh a memory of foolish tenderness for this man; yet she could not decide whether he was more of a comic spectacle than a rat. He was both.

He rose, and they all watched him

while he faltered to the wall, moved away the picture that concealed his safe, and twirled the nickel knob. Meanwhile the big man casually appropriated the automatic .38 which Oranger had had no chance to use.

He fondled it admiringly; his own contraption he stuck away in a hip pocket. Oranger turned back to them, bearing an armful of papers and boxes. He set them all down.

"Here," he said sullenly.

"Show us what you got there," the thick man commanded.

Oranger showed. Currency—of four nations; bonds that were instantly negotiable in New York or Paris as well as in London; a heap of jewelry. His own getaway cache, ready for any emergency.

The thick man stuffed his pockets. His partner did likewise. Banknotes stuck from their shirts and rubies from their trousers.

"Now—you'll go?" Oranger asked nervously.

The thick man grinned: "That just hevens it hup for the dough you howe us. Now we'll settle for the dirty trick!"

"Let me do it, Artie, let me!" the little man pleaded, wagging his automatic under Oranger's nose.

"You," said Artie generously, "can bump the lady. We mustn't 'ave a live witness hanging around here. But hall that kept me goin' these four years was the thought of killin' 'im meself!"

"I half intended it myself!" Elise said. "You needn't fear me."

Artie bared his teeth and moved his one continuous line of eyebrow up and down ferociously.

"Think you can slip a fast one over, lady? None o' that! Get ready, Davey!"

"Of all damnable situations!" Elise murmured in an aside to Oranger. "I come here all the way from India to kill you, and I've got to save your life instead!"

Oranger cringed.

"Not much'll save 'is life now, not from me!" Artie promised. "Nor yours neither!"

ELISE smiled and moved a little closer to him. She wondered if she could provoke him into mercy. She could provoke him into something.

He saw her approach, her lips parted and smiling at him.

"None o' that, now!" he said hoarsely.

He retreated a step. But his eyes were on her body, shimmering like starshine in the gray folds of her silken robe. Her hips swayed languidly toward him, very close, until her body brushed his like a thousand tiny flames, burning him dry and feverish and tense. His breath came faster until it whistled unevenly through his clenched teeth.

Little Davey, worried for him, cried out: "That's no English girl, Artie—it's a damned witch!"

"Witch!" Artie muttered, thrusting her away from him in agony. "I'll blow her to hell myself!" He raised his gun.

His face was wet with a clamminess, but his hand was steady and his eyes were hard.

She made a little tentative motion with her wrist and the gray silk of her handkerchief sighed; then her wrist flicked out suddenly and the handkerchief whirled whispering, darted faster than sight could follow it; around Artie's thick throat it curled, and the sharp *crack!* it made was not the silk snapping in air, but the vertebræ of his spine.

Artie jerked up on tiptoe; then the gray silk came loose and his head flopped grotesquely. He hit the floor.

Little hollow-cheeked Davey screamed in sudden terror; he had seen something

he didn't believe. Death couldn't happen that way, that quickly.

He turned the pearl-handled automatic on Elise and tried madly to squeeze the trigger; but again the handkerchief whispered; wrist and silk moved with incredible speed and mystic dexterity; again the sharp sickening *snap!* and Davey's hollow-cheeked head lolled, his eyes went dull, his body tumbled.

"Oh, my God! My God!" Oranger, fear scribbled upon his white face, leaned over Artie's body. He reached down to pick up the gun in the still hand.

Silk hissed beside his ear and Oranger dived chattering for the floor while Elise let her laugh peal.

"No! no!" he managed to gasp. "I'll give you anything you want!"

"Is there anything you can give me?" she asked with a curl to her lip.

"All this money— these jewels!" He indicated the valuables still sticking out where Artie and Davey had stuffed them.

"Those are already mine. They were theirs—you gave them; and since I offered their bodies as sacrifice to Kalee, by all the ancient customs of thuggee their wealth is mine."

He regained some of his composure. "You always liked to be dramatic," he said. "Thuggee is dead—stamped out long ago by the army. First thing the British did when they took over India."

She indicated the bodies. "Thuggee is dead, you say—but so are these! Their blood is an offering to Kalee, since they died by the handkerchief sacred to her. That was another trick my husband taught me!"

TENTACLES of fog beyond the casement again seemed to swirl into the form of that squatting woman with four arms, her horrid necklace and her girdle made of hands. But Oranger knew the shape of Kalee, death-goddess, who had created men and given them handkerchiefs to slay with. His imagination was playing him tricks. Bah!

"You married me to him," Elise continued. "That was your doing, and he paid you for it. But it was he who taught me the trick of death with a handkerchief; how poetic and how just that now I return to use it on you!"

She wafted the gray silk lightly through the air, demonstrating.

Oranger staggered back and clutched his throat with both hands to ward off death, yet knowing there was no defense.

She murmured, "I take what is mine." Her fingers lifted a heap of gems, a sheaf of notes and securities. "This is all I want. I came here with half a mind to kill you because there was yet passion for you in my veins, even if that passion was only hatred. But you are too small a creature. Revenge on you would be too petty. Look for a rat-hole to hide in!"

Oranger's eyes opened wide and his breath sighed in a gasp that turned into a sob.

For a moment everything was still. Then an annoyed thin voice droned from somewhere, "Scotland Yard speaking! I say, are you there? Are you——"

Elise picked up the still-neglected phone.

"Could you send a man to Oak Manse at once," she murmured, "with some spirits of ammonia? Mr. Blenheim Oranger has fainted!"

She moved to the casement and stretched out her arms to meet the fog.

The Cavern

By MANLY WADE WELLMAN and
GERTRUDE GORDON

A brief story about a doomed man who seemed to bear a charmed life

We tread the steps appointed for us; and he whose steps are appointed must tread them.
—*The Arabian Nights.*

THE old fortune-teller had done with her prattle about crossing water and receiving letters full of money. She gathered up her grimy deck of cards and shuffled away, leaving Stoll and me to finish our dinner under soft lights, accompanied by soft music. I sighed and wondered aloud why the hag had singled us out of all the patrons in the crowded restaurant.

"Because she knew I believe," replied Stoll as he poured wine.

I was amazed and a bit shocked. "You believe in fortune-tellers? Nobody of education and intelligence can possibly——"

"Granted that I have no education and intelligence, but I believe." He was quite solemn. "I've seen one come true."

I dared hope for one of Stoll's rare stories. Why do men like Stoll, who have seen so much and behaved so well in far places, keep their mouths shut? I waited, and eventually he added:

"It wasn't my fortune, but Swithin Quade's."

"Swithin Quade," I repeated eagerly. "The African Quade? The one in the Sunday feature sections?"

"Right. I met him on his first day in Africa."

SWITHIN QUADE was the sort of budding empire-builder Kipling used to write about [began Stoll]. You know what I mean—broad shoulders, long legs, golden-brown curls, eyes like the April sky, close-clipped young mustache, close-clipped young attitudes, and adventure hunger enough for all the explorers since the launching of the Argo. His people had no money, but they had managed to educate him well, and through influential friends he'd been signed up to cut his teeth on the tomb of a priest-noble of the Hyksos, up Nile a way. I was camp and digging chief on that job, under Thomson, the big Egyptology pot.

Alexandria was even more garish then than now—there was considerable tourist money, and no war scare. As soon as Quade hit the dock he wanted to see dancers, snake-charmers, mosques and all the rest of it. I took him 'round, because Thomson was busier than I and didn't know so many places. Quade and I wound up late the first afternoon in a loudish spot, with striped awnings, and mutton stew, and hashish in the coffee. A bunch of vicious-looking blacks were belting away at drums and wailing on pipes, and a very dirty and ragged old Arab sidled up to whine for *"Bakshish!"*

I warned him off with the traditional *"Mafish!"*, and tried to ignore him. But the old duffer—bent he was, and dried up like a bunch of raisins—began to plead for a chance to tell fortunes. Quade asked what it was about, and I explained.

"Good egg," said Quade at once, his face as bright and happy as a child's behind that trim mustache. "Have him tell mine."

The walking mummy understood

Quade's enthusiastic manner, if not his English, and right away set down his little tray of polished wood on the edge of our table. Then he poured sand on the tray, from an old tobacco pouch. He began to fiddle with his scrawny fingers, making little rifts and ridges and hills.

"Good egg," Quade repeated. "This blighter is just what I hoped to run into. Picturesque and all that—hurry up, old fellow!" And his smile grew wider.

But the sand diviner did not smile back. He only paddled in the sand, and stared out of ancient eyes that looked dim and foul, like pools with scum on them. Finally he mumbled something.

"What's he saying?" asked Quade, and I translated:

"Death sits waiting in a cavern. . . ."

The old bat had waited for me to pass this along. And now he added something on his own hook. "This other *effendi,*" he said, turning his dim gaze on me, "shall be witness, and will know that I have not lied."

QUADE'S grin faded into a frown of intense interest, and he leaned forward to look at the sand on the tray. It was all smoothed out, under those dirty claws, and in the middle was a little hole. Funny that it should look so deep and dark, that hole; there wasn't more than a handful of sand, yet you'd think the diviner had made a pit miles deep.

I saw that Quade was suddenly repelled, and I gave the old vulture a piece of silver, a shilling I think. He bowed and blessed us, and gathered up his tray of sand and scrabbled out. Quade drank some coffee.

"I say, that was nasty," he mumbled to me. "Let's go back to the hotel, eh?"

So we went. But he found it was close and hot there, and stepped out to take a bit of a stroll by himself. Back he came in half an hour, and he looked quite drawn and stuffy.

"These swine are pulling my leg," he said angrily, and then he told me what had happened. Down in some narrow alley full of shops and booths, he had come upon another fortune-teller, a baggy old woman who spoke English. Probably he hoped to hear something conventional about a blond wife and a journey across deep water, to take the taste of the other prophecy out of his mouth. So he stuck out his palm for her to read.

"And I swear, Stoll," he told me, "that she gave one look and then screwed up her face, and said the same thing."

"What same thing?" I asked him.

"What that filthy old Johnny with the sand said. 'Look out for the cavern,' or 'Death waits in the cavern,' or the like. See here, I jolly well don't like it."

I advised him to keep his chin up and not bother about natives. Finally he managed to make light of the business, but not very convincingly. And when we got to Cairo—Thompson had to stop there for a big row with the officials—he gave the business a third try.

It was in a cool, conventional little tea garden—run by a smart Scotswoman, who knew how a place like that would catch homesick English travelers. She had native waiters dressed like Europeans, and crumpets and all that, and a very lovely girl in a stagy gipsy costume to read the leaves in the cups. Quade wanted to test fate again.

The girl came to our table when he beckoned, and she was plainly intrigued by his grin and his curls and his youth. I think she intended to give him such a reading as would fetch him back later—maybe not for tea alone. But as she turned the cup and squinted at the tangle inside, her handsome face grew grave, and its olive faded to a parchment tint.

"You must take care," she said husk-

ily, in accented English. "Take care of the cave—the cavern." Her eyes grew wider, and she looked at me with them. "You, sir, will see a terrible fate that is his. . . ."

That night Quade packed his bags, and told Thomson and me that he was chucking his job.

"I'm not having any of that cavern," he said. "Three warnings are quite enough."

"What cavern?" I demanded, smiling a little.

"Cavern or underground tomb, what's the difference?"

"You can't take such prophecies seriously," put in Thomson.

Quade replied, very tritely, that there were more things in heaven and earth, and so on. "I know you chaps think I'm afraid," he added.

"Neither of us said anything like that," I replied at once.

"And no more am I afraid," he almost snapped back. "I'll stay in Africa—but in the open. Call me idiotic, or superstitious, or what you will. Better safe than sorry, is my motto."

He was as good as his word for ten years, and he thrived enormously on African danger.

Today he is a tradition, a legend even. Everybody has heard about how, in Jo'burg, he walked up on a mad Kaffir with a gun, who had even those tough Transvaal police buffaloed for the moment; the Kaffir fired twice, stirring Quade's curls with both shots, and then Quade knocked him loose from the gun with one straight dunt on the mouth. Some sort of foundation wanted to give him a medal, but he wouldn't accept. He went instead with some romantic Frenchmen who tried to find the Dying-place of the Elephants—sure, people still look for it; I, for one, believe it exists. But all Quade got was a terrible dose of black-water fever. He recovered from that and complications, though eleven men out of twelve would have died.

Next he got up into West Central, and visited the Lavalli-valli. Instead of thinking that he was a missionary and eating him, they thought he was a god and worshipped him. I understand that Quade had to fight one skeptic, a big brute about seven feet tall, very skilful with the stabbing-spear. But Quade dodged the first thrust, got in close and took the spear away, and gave it back right through the fellow's lungs. That made him solider than teak with the Lavalli-valli, who love a fighter better than anything else in all the cosmos. Quade might have ruled there forever, but all he wanted was to trade for the native rubber they had. He got a whole caravan-load, and lost it to Portuguese gamblers in Benguela. Broke, he accepted an offer to help the inland Boer settlers fight off a Gangella uprising. He had more escapes than Bonnie Prince Charlie.

Then he went to Ethiopia, just as the Italians pushed in. Quade took up for Haile Selassie, who dubbed him "Ras Quedu" and put him in command of a kind of a suicide division. His men—Africa's tallest and finest, as I hear—were slaughtered almost to the last one, in the fighting around Jijiga. But Quade was captured by some of Mussolini's Moslem auxiliaries. While the chiefs were arguing whether he should die as an infidel or live as a prisoner of war, Quade throttled a sentry and escaped. He fled clear through the interior, safe into British territory.

That and a thousand other things made him news. Lowell Thomas began talking about him on the radio, and W. B. Seabrook or somebody of that sort wrote a biography, *Quade the Incredible*. I daresay he'll be a solar myth before the century is out.

I CUT his trail just about a year ago, on the fringe of a rain-forest somewhere in the 'tween-mountain country of Portuguese West. If we had a map I'd show you where. His boys and mine entered a little village from opposite sides. I, following in, heard, "Hullo there, Stoll! This *is* a lark!", and there was Quade. Not the curly golden boy any more, but a tough-tempered, lean-cheeked hunter. He had grown a short beard, into which the toothbrush mustache had lengthened and blended. His rosy face had been baked brown, and his was the ready way of moving and standing that comes from harsh life gladly met. The one thing that made me remember the old Swithin Quade—or, rather, the young Swithin Quade—was his bright blue eye, as happy and honest under his worn slouch hat as it had been that first afternoon in Alexandria.

When we had crushed each other's hands and slapped each other's backs almost purple, we quartered our outfits side by side, just at the gate of the village stockade. Then we went together to buy beans and manioc, and he invited me to supper at his fire. After eating we swapped yarns, and of course Quade's yarns were by far the best.

"You still remember those Alexandrian fortunes?" I asked at length.

He smiled, but nodded, and said that he had more than remembered. He had asked fortunes from varied seers—Kaffir witch-doctors, Moslem marabouts, and ordinary crystal-gazers in Cape Town and Durban. "And they've been strangely unanimous," he summed up. "I give you my word, that again and again there's been something about a cave, or a cavern, or just a hole. And I'm always told that I'd best stay out."

"And have you stayed out?" I prompted.

"I have that," he chuckled. "I must say that, if death waits for me in a cavern, it has remained there. Mine's the traditional charmed life."

"Don't forget," I reminded, "that I'm supposed to witness your fate in a cavern."

"I haven't forgotten, Stoll. But I'm here to hunt—hippopotami just now, I've been too busy all these years to get one—and if you come along tomorrow, we'll take care to stay clear of holes. Then, when we separate in a day or so, I'll be safe again, what?"

I joined in chuckling over the conceit.

But he was dead serious on one point—staying in the open. That night he slept in a tent, not the snug hut that the solicitious villagers had built especially for him. His gun-bearer told my headman that Quade always slept that way; that, when in the settlements, he, Quade, never sat in a house without the windows open, and had twice refused to take a job in the diamond country for dislike of entering a mine. I heard all this at breakfast in the morning, and made bold to ask Quade about it when he came over to renew his invitation to the hunt.

"My bearer's a gossipy chap, but he's telling the truth," Quade confessed cheerfully. "I go into precious few houses except when it's necessary, and into no cellars whatever. Now then, what heavy rifles have you? . . . Oh, I see, Dutch guns. Two nice weapons, those. Well, shall we start?"

Away we went, with our gun-bearers and a leash of villagers for guides. Down valley from the camp we approached a great tangled belt of the forest, and one of the local hunters pointed to a tunnel-like opening among the trees and bushes, the "hole in the jungle" made by nothing but a hippo.

"I say, that looks as if it might be the cavern you and I heard about once," said Quade, and not in a joking manner.

He hesitated, but only for a moment, and then led the way in.

We traversed the leafy passage, and I felt as jumpy as Quade. But the closest approach to danger along the entire way was an ineffably beautiful little snake, that struck at a village boy and missed. My bearer killed it with a stick he carried.

At the other end of the tunnel we came out on the banks of one of those African rivers unknown and uncharted — deep, swift, tree-walled, as dark and exotic as the one in the poem about Kubla Khan. As a matter of fact, Quade muttered a phrase from that very poem about "Alph, the sacred river," but I refrained from adding the bit about "caverns measureless to man." Meanwhile, the villagers poked into a clump of sappy-leaved bushes, and drew into view a brace of dugouts, very nicely finished and perfectly balanced. Quade and his bearer got into one of them, and I with my bearer took the other. Each of us had a pair of villagers to paddle. Together we dropped downstream.

It was I, a little ahead of Quade, who saw the hippo first.

He was floating like a water-soaked log in a little bay where the current slowed down considerably. His nostril bumps were in sight, and his ears pricked up to show that they heard us, but he kept perfectly still, hoping we'd pass him by.

My bearer snapped his fingers backward to attract Quade's attention in the rear boat, and I, sitting in the bow, set my elbow on my knee and aimed for what I could see of the hippo's narrow, flat cranium. He was no farther away than the door yonder—I couldn't miss. And I was using a three-ounce explosive slug, big and heavy enough to go through a brick wall.

I couldn't miss, I say. But I did miss. No, not quite; I must have nicked an ear or grazed an eyebrow. For next instant the hippo, stung and furious, swung round in the water like a trout, and charged.

He didn't charge me. He didn't even notice me, then or later. He tore past me in the water—perhaps it was shallow enough for him to run on the bottom—straight at Quade's boat.

I heard Quade curse in Umbundu, and his express rifle roared. Whatever the bullet did, it was not enough to stop the hippo. I, snatching my second rifle from my bearer, saw the great lump of a head dip down under the keel of Quade's boat. The hippo tossed, as a bull might toss, and the canoe with its four passengers whirled lightly upward in the air. I've seen an empty bottle tossed like that, by a careless drunkard.

The three natives, shrieking horribly, flew in all directions and splashed into the water. Quade must have been braced or otherwise held in position at the bow, for when the boat came down he was still in it. There was a great upward torrent of water, and through it I saw the bottom of the stricken canoe. The hippo, close in, bit a piece out of one thwart, as a boy nibbles ginger-cake. I had my second gun and was aiming. This time I wouldn't miss; but before I could touch trigger, Quade came to the surface, right in the way of my shot.

"Down! Down!" I yelled at him, and he turned his face toward me, as if mildly curious at my agitation. And then the hippo had him, in a single champing clutch of those great steam-shovel jaws. Quade screamed once, and I saw him shaken like an old glove by a bulldog.

I fired, and the hippo sank on the instant. He took Quade with him. The ripples were purple with blood—Quade's or the beast's. And we got for shore and

safety. Later we tried to recover Quade's body, but we never did.

* * * * *

STOLL was silent, and sipped wine to show that his story was finished.

"But the cavern," I protested. "What about the cavern, where death was waiting for him?"

Stoll lifted his eyebrows, as a Frenchman might shrug his shoulders.

"Did you ever see a hippopotamus open its mouth—wide?"

The Eyes of Ustad Isa

By CHARLES HENRY MACKINTOSH

An eery tale of the Taj Mahal

1

THINK deeply, now, and then name the most beautiful building in the world. The more you know about beauty in building, the more certain is it that your choice will fall upon that one to which I choose to give the title "Towers of Tyranny," rather than the *Taj Mahal!* Understand me clearly, though, I do not object to the name. After all, it *is* the tomb of Mumtaz Mahal, the chosen of the palace, and she was lovely and kind.

But it is not truly a monument to her. No, it is a monument to the tyrannous egotism, the savage cruelty, the base ingratitude of Shah Jehan, upon whose name I spit! For three hundred years, men have been saying: *"Shah Jehan built the Taj Mahal."* Bah! Shah Jehan could not have built a tomb to hide the body of an accursed dog! He could but use his tyrannous authority to steal the work of a true builder, and sign it with his name!

But that has been the way of kings for ever, and it is not that on which I base my deathless, bodiless hatred of Shah Jehan. It was not for that I drove him to the brink of insanity, drove him from his Peacock Throne, gave him, bound, brain and body, to the parricidal ingratitude that leapt from his own loins, and drove him down to death after eleven years of bitter imprisonment in his own palace-city, and drive him still, in the underworld, from horror to horror!

Nor shall my hatred be appeased until there be carved upon the cornerstone of the Taj Mahal: *"This blossom of white marble bloomed from the eyes of USTAD ISA, upon whom be Peace!"*

2

USTAD ISA, the Turk, was in Persia when, in 1027 of the Year of the Hegira, according to the calendar of the great Calif Omar, the emissaries of Shah Jehan sought him out and found him and said:

"Come. The Great Shah, the Shah of

Shahs, the Shah Jehan, has chosen you from among all the master builders of the age to create, at Agra, a building that shall be among buildings what Mumtaz Mahal was among women, and what Shah Jehan is among men. Come. Marble and all manner of precious stones, gold and silver, a lakh of lakhs of rupees, workmen outnumbering the armies of many monarchs, cunning and skilled craftsmen of every craft, chosen from the world's masters of crafts, all shall be beneath your hand and under your eye. You shall dream a dream of ivory towers of Paradise, and your dream shall be crystallized in white marble, to be the marvel of the world for ever and ever. Come."

And Ustad Isa came.

3

SHAH JEHAN received Ustad Isa in private audience and made much of him, saying:

"Oh, Shah of Builders, the Shah of Shahs delights to do you honor! Raise for me now a noble building, fit to enshrine the lost white loveliness of my beloved. Let it be beautiful and graceful even as she was beautiful and graceful. Build it so that the eyes of endless, unborn generations may gaze upon it, and see what the world has lost, in what the world has gained. Though the cost be one-half of my empire, count not the cost. You have my leave to begin."

And Ustad Isa said: "Harkening and obedience, oh Shah of Shahs. On my eyes be it!"

Yes, he used that common, curtly phrase, the poor, *blind* fool, for all that his eyes were then the deepest-seeing eyes in all the world! *"On my eyes be it!"* he said, and went out from the king's palace to begin upon his long, long task of loving artistry.

4

BEHOLD the building! One hundred and thirty feet square and seventy feet high, with a dome like a roc's egg of white marble, rising to a height of one hundred and twenty feet; with four tall, slender spires guarding the four corners, each spire one hundred and thirty-three feet in height. Flawless white marble, carved as though it were cloudy lacework. Gemmed mosaics, fit for the decoration of kings' diadems. Cunning metalwork of silver and of gold. Behold the setting for the building, the gardens of glorious color, the long mirror-pool wherein all that white loveliness repeats itself, until the mind of man swoons away from the unsupportable burden of so much beauty. Behold, indeed, the Shah of Shrines, from the brain of the Shah of Builders, to the memory of Mumtaz Mahal, to the glory and to the service of the Shah of Shahs, the Shah Jehan.

And the Shah Jehan looked upon the finished work, and his cold heart flamed again within him.

"It is good!" he said. "It is very good!"

And it was good.

5

AGAIN the Shah Jehan received Ustad Isa in private audience, to receive his reward.

"Is it indeed the crown of your work, oh Shah of Builders?" inquired the Great King.

"It is the crown of my lifework, oh Shah!" replied Ustad Isa.

"It is well. It is as it should be. It is as it *shall* be!" decreed the Shah.

He gestured, and from an archway behind the throne, two ebon slaves entered, one staggering beneath the weight of a

great brazier of rose-glowing charcoal, the other steadying a folk-like tool within the violet heart of the flame.

This Ustad Isa saw, yet knew not what he saw, nor that he saw for the last time.

The brawny slave who bore the brazier set it down before the throne, and seized the builder, twisting his arms behind his back and holding them there, crooking a huge black limb, like a banyan root, about his knees. The other slave drew the fork-like thing from the flame, its twin points bright as stars, and brought them before the builder's face.

Ustad Isa struggled, but he was as one of the bandar-log in the coils of the python. He cried out to the king: "Is *this* my reward for my service to the Shah of Shahs?"

The Shah shook his head. "You shall eat richly, you shall drink deep, you shall sleep softly all the days of your life, oh Shah of Builders, but you shall build no more. It is my will. I seal it—so!"

He gestured again, and the flaming points pierced the eyes of Ustad Isa, even as he cried out: "Not that! Rather slay me, oh Shah!"

The words ended in a wild shriek, while the foul smell of roasting flesh was wafted up to the nostrils of the Shah.

6

THE Shah's own physician tended the hurts of Ustad Isa, and after many days he was strong again. The Shah sent him a little black slave to be his eyes, and to lead him wherever he would go. Ustad Isa had the little slave lead him once again into the presence of the king.

"What more can we do for you, oh Shah of Builders?" inquired the ruler of the Mongol world, and Ustad Isa answered:

"I come to claim the reward for my service, oh king!"

"What reward do you crave?"

"Give me *death,* oh Great King! I cannot live without my work. I cannot work without my eyes. Give me death!"

The Shah shook his head, though Ustad Isa did not know that.

"The petition is denied," decreed the Shah. "We gave you our royal word that you shall eat richly, drink deeply, and sleep softly all the days of your life. It would have been easier to kill you, but you will learn to love life again. No, Shah of Builders, I give you *life,* not death."

And then Ustad Isa cursed the king, till the little slave fell on his face with fear, and the courtiers about the throne were shaken as by a wind in a forest of saplings.

The knuckles of the king's hands gleamed bone-white upon the arm-bosses of the throne. For many moments he did not trust himself to speak, and when he did, his voice rasped like a sharpening-stone upon a sword. *"Live, dog!"* he said.

But the dog preferred to die.

7

HOUR after hour, day after day, the Shah Jehan stretched length-long on the cold marble before the carven crypt of his lost queen, mumbling her name: *"Mumtaz Mahal! Mumtaz Mahal!"*

The Grand Vizier risked intrusion time and again, though each time he barely escaped with his life.

"Fool!" raved the Great King: "She is here and only here, I tell you! I see her, but I cannot touch her silken hair, her soft, warm flesh! I speak to her, but she does not answer me! Yet you dare to bid me rise and leave her and come away to the Council! I crave no other

voice than hers. Leave me, or——" he ended with a wild gesture.

And so, at length, the rebellious seed of his own loins shot up against him, and overshadowed the Peacock Throne. He who had been King of Kings was torn from the Tomb, and cast into another living tomb in the deep dungeons of his own palace. And there, too, that which he took to be the shade of Mumtaz Mahal visited him, and still with no loving words upon her lips. In cold and utter silence, her image hung in air above his eyes and looked down upon him without seeming even to see him.

He wailed: "When thou wast flesh of my flesh, did I not cherish thee? Did I not lift thee up to be the chosen of the palace? Did I not place the ransom of many rajahs upon thine arms and neck and about thine ankles? Did I not turn to thee often, and to thee alone? Wast thou not the heart of my heart, the soul of my soul, oh my beloved? And wherein, then, have I offended that thou withholdest from me the light of thine eyes, the solace of thy smile? And what must I do to win pardon?"

He forced himself to look straight into those well-loved eyes, now so impassive, so cold and dead. There was no spoken answer, but, for a moment, the fallen tyrant thought that the lovely eyes of Mumtaz Mahal became twin whirlpools of raging flame, and to his nostrils faintly came the foul smell of roasting flesh.

That vision, once seen, became recurrent. He could never look upon the face of his beloved but the whirlpool would at once begin to form and that ghastly stench to enter his nostrils.

The guard who brought him his coarse and scanty food, from the bounty of his son, the Shah of Shahs, found him one noon stiff upon the stone floor, his face frozen into such a mask of mingled hate and horror that never again could the man close his own eyes without a shudder.

The King of Kings, the tyrant, the robber of better men's dreams, had gone to get the rest of his reward.

8

USTAD ISA met him just beyond the Doors of Death—Ustad Isa who had never left him alone for one moment, since he had dared to die despite the royal decree—Ustad Isa, who had formed his spirit-self into the living likeness of the king's lost love, time and time and time again, until the kingly brain had become a nest of stinging scorpions—Ustad Isa, unto whom hatred had given the power to torture his torturer even after he had drawn him through the Doors of Death — Ustad Isa, who *still* plays the part of the king's lost love, appearing, staring coldly with eyes that turn into whirlpools of flame, and vanishing in a foul stench of charring flesh, only to appear again—and again—and again—Ustad Isa, who shall continue to appear unto him of whom fifteen generations of fools have said: *"He built the Taj Mahal,"* until there be carved into the cornerstone thereof:

"This blossom of white marble bloomed from the eyes of USTAD ISA!"

You ask me who decrees that it shall be so? *I* decree it, I, *USTAD ISA!* On my eyes be it!

A Witch's Curse*

By PAUL ERNST

THIS is a strange tale, of ancient beliefs—or misbeliefs if you will—projected into a Twentieth Century setting; of bizarre happenings with never a tangible foundation of fact on which to rest the bewildered mind of the observer; of events that, it seems, could never occur outside the covers of those old hand-illumined volumes dealing with "Black Magycke."

You may believe it or not. Frankly, the newspapers did not. There was in their uninspired columns no hint of anything beyond the realm of everyday happenings. Mrs. Boyd Barringer, wife of the last of that family of Barringers who had packed their Puritanical belongings and landed in New England long before the tea party—had suddenly and completely disappeared! Simple enough, the newspapers implied. A husband who was not too attentive, a secret admirer—and flight to parts unknown.

But in this implication the newspapers were wrong—or at least only half right. Mrs. Barringer, granted, had departed for parts unknown. But it was not because of a too indifferent husband; nor was it due to one of those unfortunate love affairs that occasionally upset the most solidly established homes. There was a different reason from either of these behind her sudden disappearance—a reason that goes back two hundred and thirty years to the mysterious labor of an elderly woman who lived, and died with suddenness and violence, in Salem, Massachusetts.

To begin with, Boyd Barringer was not an indifferent husband. There never lived a man who loved more profoundly, nor who was more kindly attentive than he was to Clara Barringer, his wife. And she in her turn adored him too completely to gaze at another man with more than the casual glance of a stranger.

Their very marriage is proof of this love of theirs. For Clara, apprehensive of the curse that she felt was laid upon her, did not want to inflict sorrow on Boyd; and for months she held out against his urgent pleading that she be his wife. That he continued so to plead until he had won her in spite of her loving fears, and that she consented at last to his pleading in spite of every obstacle her harassed mind could set forth, indicates

* From WEIRD TALES for February, 1929.

more than any other circumstance the depth of their affection for each other.

The scene in which Boyd had finally won over her unwillingness to risk bringing him harm was a stormy one in some respects.

"Clara," said Boyd, his hands closing over her round, firm arms rather cruelly and his eyes searching into hers, "Clara, is there someone else? Do you refuse me because there is another man before me in your heart?"

Clara hesitated before answering that question. Her eyes took in every detail of the man before her with a painful accuracy; for she firmly intended that they should never meet again, and she wanted a last mental picture of him to carry with her.

Boyd was rather tall, but his inclination toward heaviness took away from his height. Wide, thick shoulders sloped into a powerful neck. His features were purposeful, almost grim. A typical man of the business world, one would say, successful and commanding, with not too much sentiment or dreamy nonsense to hinder his path among the material things of life. But his eyes contradicted the rest of his appearance. Deep blue, they were, almost like a woman's in their tenderness and understanding. His eyes lent a softness to his firm mouth, and took away some of the harshness of his chin. A man of action with the eyes of a lover. It is small wonder that Clara should find it hard to utter the lie that was intended to drive him away.

Nevertheless, driving her rebellious tongue with her head instead of with her pleading heart, lie she did.

"You have guessed it," she said, looking straight into his eyes. "I love another man. That is why I can never marry you."

But Boyd had not been fooled. He had looked back into her own eyes—those odd eyes of hers with the spindle-shaped, feline pupils—and he had smiled.

"You aren't telling me the truth, Clara. That's not the reason why you won't marry me. Are you still letting yourself think about that fantastic curse that's supposed to crop out in your family tree sometime? Would you actually let such an insane legend keep us apart when we want each other so badly?"

"It's not an insane legend!" Clara cried, a break in her words. "Look at me! Just look at me! Can't you see the seeds of fulfilment of that old prophecy in my eyes, in my head, in the very way I walk?" She began to weep, wildly, her shoulders shaking with incipient hysteria.

Boyd attempted to calm her, to humor her.

"Come now," he suggested, "let's assume that this two-hundred-year-old fable has some truth in it. Let us do it the honor of investigating it thoroughly so that our reason may kill it for ever. You are too intelligent to believe in such a fantastic old wive's tale without proof of some kind. Show me the proof, then, and tell me the whole history. And if, after I have heard it all, I still want you to marry me, you will, won't you? Say you will, dear."

"How can I answer?" whispered Clara. "Surely no one was ever in such a position before. But I will tell you the whole story now instead of the hints and snatches of it that I have allowed you to hear. Wait just a moment while I go up to the attic—there is an old trunk there with the documents and pictures relating to my family history."

"I'll go with you. There is a light up there? Good." And Boyd followed her up the flights of steps that ended under the gables of the old stone house—and in a discovery astounding enough, though of course utterly unbelievable.

THE place in which a story is related has much to do with the impression made by that story. In the full light of day, in some prosaic spot, Boyd would have laughed at the crazy tale, proof or no proof—as, indeed, he did next morning. But up there under the roof, in the dim light of a single small electric globe, he must have spent a most uncomfortable hour listening to Clara's incredible history of a feud that had endured for seven generations.

The big attic had been floored but never finished off further. Like square-hewn ribs the beams depended overhead, festooned with cobwebs, vague and uncertain in the illumination of the unshaded, dust-crusted light bulb. The place was cluttered with old chairs and tables with legs like tentacles in the shadowy darkness. An eery spot, certainly, and almost too well fitted for Clara's words.

Several very old chests were in a far corner; and one of these Boyd dragged out under the light at Clara's request. After a struggle with the rusty catches this was opened, revealing a miscellany of ancient garments, pictures, and yellowed papers.

"In 1692," Clara began dully, "a solitary old woman lived in a shack on the edge of Salem, Massachusetts. She was supposed to have a son somewhere, but no one knew for sure, and he never came to visit her. She kept herself alive by raising vegetables and selling them or trading them to the neighboring townspeople.

"She must have been rather a repulsive-looking creature—very old and wrinkled, with a long chin and a long nose that almost met like pincers, due to her lack of teeth. She was not very clean, and her mind was a bit unhinged. But she did no one harm and was not herself molested; at least at the time my story begins.

"My mother's ancestors also lived in Salem—the Manfred Jones clan. There was, among other children of this family, a brooding, dark-haired little girl by the name of Emily—my own ancestress. Here is a picture of her as a small child."

Clara handed Boyd a miniature, rather dimmed by age, but cleverly done and quite legible. It was the picture of a girl of about eleven years; though the eyes, dark and intense, looked older. Boyd gazed at the picture with interest, then handed it back silently.

"The old woman I spoke of had often brought her vegetables to the Jones home, and she met Emily. She seemed immensely attracted to the little girl. But Emily, possibly because she was afraid, would never make up to her. So it was that one day when the old crone passed her hand longingly over Emily's fine dark hair, the girl squirmed out of her grasp, kicked and clawed at her like a little animal, and ran away. Then from a safe distance she proceeded to make faces at her and taunt her with her bent ugliness of age. It was a very regrettable thing, but, after all, it was natural in a child so young.

"From that one scene grew the shadow that has clung to my mother's family ever since. For the old woman hated the child from then on. And that hatred was mutual. Emily Jones went out of her way to invent pranks to play on the woman, and incited all her little friends to do the same. This, too, was regrettable, but it was something any child might do.

"It was in the early spring of that year that queer tales began to get around concerning the old lady. Farmers complained that cattle sickened when she looked in their direction. A neighbor of hers said that she had the Evil Eye. In short, all the stock tales of a witch's persecution were told on her. She began to be known as the Witch of Salem town.

Everyone avoided her. No one bought or traded for her vegetables, and she was near to starving to death.

"The vague rumors concerning her might never have amounted to much. The most rabid period of the witch craze lasted only a year or so, you know. And she might have weathered the storm of the neighborhood's disapproval and fear very easily—but for little Emily Jones.

"With an intelligence older than her eleven years, Emily took in all the talk concerning the old woman she hated with the petulance of childhood. And as she listened she remembered a sentence that the crone had flung after her when she was particularly annoyed at some prank the little girl had played on her:

" 'I'll turn you into a cat, Emily Jones! I'll turn you into a cat if you don't stop your nuisance! Folks say I'm a witch. Well—a witch can turn little girls into cats. And that's just what I'll do to you, Emily Jones!'

"That threat rankled in the girl's mind, and it ripened and grew until a thought flashed on her one day: Suppose she pretended that the witch really was turning her into a cat! What a joke that would be! How it would plague her! .

"Old enough and intelligent enough to reason thus far, Emily was yet unable to go farther and realize the extreme gravity of her plan. She was too young, of course, to understand the strength of the feeling that was gathering against the old hag.

"So the child put her scheme in motion. . . .

"She began, one evening, to crawl catlike under the tables and chairs, mewing and scratching with imaginary claws at her brothers and sisters. She licked her arms with her tongue and glared blankly about, imitating a cat with all the monkey cleverness a child has for imitations.

"Naturally the father, Manfred Jones, was astounded. More, he was as badly frightened as a grown man can be.

" 'Emily! Emily!' he cried, 'What in heaven's name possesses you? You act as though you were bewitched!'

" 'I am!' was the solemn answer. 'The old witch said she would turn me into a cat. And I can feel her doing it now!'

Manfred Jones was an influential man. Also, in common with a great many other normally intelligent men, he believed in witchcraft. He took his little daughter's statement at face value and proceeded against the so-called witch with all the power at his command.

"In April of the year 1692 he urged action against the old lady in a public hearing presided over by six magistrates and four ministers of the gospel. So violent were his charges and so high was feeling running against the old woman that she was promptly 'cried out,' or accused formally of being a witch. Without further ceremony she was thrown into the crude town jail.

"And now the girl Emily was terrified at the consequences of her thoughtless prank. She told of the trick she had played. She pleaded that the old woman be released, swearing that she had made up the whole thing. But no one believed her. Solemnly it was judged that Emily's denials were a further proof of the witch's guilt: She had sent a demon to the child which impelled her to withdraw her charges!

"The jailer, an ignorant and superstitious man, furthered the misfortune of the unhappy woman. He accused her of bewitching his stomach so that it was seized with violent cramps. And this absurd, utterly insane charge was the last straw. The people of Salem were now so frightened and angry that they visited the magistrates in a body and demanded that the witch be put to death.

"The magistrates obeyed the people's wish. They decreed that the witch be hanged.

"By some odd telepathy the crone had a premonition of her fate. At the moment when the death decree was signed, according to the jailer, she cried out and sank in a senseless heap to the floor of the cell. And then comes the strangest part of all. . . .

"When she regained consciousness she began to pace her cell like a maniac, shrieking and shaking her fists. 'They're going to hang me!' she shouted in her high, shrill voice. 'They're going to kill me! And it's the Jones brat that's the cause! She told them I said I'd change her into a cat. So they're going to hang me!'

"And it was at this point, the jailer said in his later account, that she stopped dead-still and raised her joined hands as though she were praying.

" 'They're killing me on the word of a child!' she said harshly. 'Very well—I'll be quit with the child! By all the devils in hell, by the stars in heaven's floor, by all the ghostly guards of that witchcraft of which I am accused, I'll do as the child charged. I *will* change her into a cat!'

"And there in that dimly lit cell the desperate old hag squatted on the dirt floor and closed her eyes and mumbled and whined to herself. And back in the Jones home, Emily, half sick with terror at the things she'd done, began to change under the very eyes of her amazed family! With every syllable the condemned witch uttered half a mile away, the girl jerked convulsively as though she had been struck.

"The pupils of her eyes quivered and shook, and finally became slitted and catlike. She began to crawl around the floor in dead earnest now, mewing and spitting. Actually a fine, almost imperceptible growth of hair, like fur, showed on her arms and the backs of her hands!

"We'll never know what dread thing would have happened—for action was swift in Massachusetts in 1692. The mob poured down to the jail with the death decree, burst open the doors and proceeded to hang the witch from a beam in her own cell.

"Just before the final moment she laughed, a high, empty, awful laugh. 'You've got me now,' she screamed. 'But I'll have my revenge! If I must wait till the seventh generation, I'll have revenge!'

"And then the end. She died with a curse on her lips against the family that had been the cause of her execution."

CLARA shuddered and covered her face with her hands. And Boyd, his own face ashen and his lips white and dry, drew her close to him.

"A mad, dangerous legend to let live," he whispered. "But, Clara—my heavens! Surely you aren't believing such a monstrous thing!"

"Our ancestors in Salem were strong, firm-minded, material men, Boyd. If so many of such men believed in witchcraft—were so desperately afraid of it that they took human life to protect themselves — it would indicate that there is actually something in the Black Art, wouldn't it?"

"Impossible!" said Boyd. But there was a shadow on his face that contradicted the spoken word.

"Anyway, there are proofs," said Clara drearily. "Awful proofs! Here are the records of the public hearing where the witch was cried out. And here is the death warrant. And here is the document of Manfred Jones." She handed him a packet of yellow papers, documents. "But here, Boyd, is the most conclusive proof of all—a picture of Emily Jones when

she was a woman, years after the witch's curse."

Boyd was conscious of a shudder as he looked into the miniature that showed the girl Emily grown up.

With uncanny intuition the artist had caught at secret, hidden things in the sad face. The eyes, with their spindle-shaped, ominously slitted pupils; the odd set of the head; the hint of unnatural hair in the shading of the delicate upper lip; all breathed of unbelievable metamorphosis. Boyd suddenly covered the picture with his hand to shut out the queer eyes that seemed to live and stare at him.

"And my eyes, too, Boyd," Clara murmured, reading his thought. "They are the same. And I—am the seventh generation! The witch, with her last breath, said distinctly the seventh generation. And I am the seventh!"

"Clara, compose yourself, dear." Boyd's face was white but steady. "What you deduce, the thing you fear, is not possible. Let us laugh at this silly tale as it deserves, and forget it forever. Clara—will you marry me?"

"In spite of—of——"

"In spite of the legend? Of course. All the fairy-stories in the world couldn't change my love for you. Please!"

He held out his arms, and Clara, doubting and wondering still but tired to the death of bearing her heavy burden alone, crept close to him and gave her promise.

"Just one thing more," Boyd called out as he was leaving, "what was the name of that old witch of yours? I'd like to look her up and see from the records whether her son was mythical or a real being who left a family. It might help make our minds easy if I gather all the facts in the case."

"I'm not sure of her name," said Clara slowly. "The records I have are contradictory there. The death decree named her Joan Byfield. But in the minutes of the public hearing she was written down as Joan Basfield. I don't know which is correct."

"Basfield!" cried Boyd, startled. "Basfield! Clara, tell me—is that spelled with one 's' or two?"

"Spelled with one 's,'" said Clara, wondering at his excitement. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh—nothing. If it is spelled with one 's,' or if it was Byfield, it couldn't be the same. But—the devil! It couldn't be the same in any event. The very idea is preposterous!"

"What are you talking of, Boyd?"

"Nothing, dear," said Boyd, refusing to meet her puzzled eyes. "Nothing. A foolish passing thought of mine, not worth mentioning."

Slowly he descended the steps, his head bent, his thoughts far away.

LIFE flowed smoothly for Boyd and Clara Barringer.

Realizing that setting is half the trouble of any chronic mind disorder, Boyd insisted on selling Clara's old stone house, putting the proceeds in trust for her, and shortly afterward they moved down to New York.

The apprehension gradually faded from Clara's eyes—those eyes with the odd, slitted pupils—and she was a normal, loving wife. Boyd was content to believe that the fantasy that had festered in her brain since she was a girl, had faded from her consciousness forever. The aged documents treating with one Joan Basfield, or Byfield, witch, who went about transforming little girls into cats, had been burned in the furnace with all the ceremony the rite demanded; and the uncanny miniature of Emily Jones had accompanied the records into the fire.

Clara moved contentedly and prosaically about the handsome house Boyd

had bought in New York. And, after two years, during which no shadow of her delusion had obtruded, Boyd felt that it was safe to make a request—a request he would certainly have made sooner had he not felt that trouble might result from a certain similarity of names.

"Clara," he said casually one evening, "we have plenty of room here. I wonder if you would mind very much if I had my Aunt Jane up for a long visit? She's quite old and helpless, alone in the world. Do you care if I invite her?"

Clara smiled. That Boyd was fond of his mother's sister she knew well. Quite often he had mentioned her. An old woman now, but still almost dismayingly clever, she lived alone with few friends and few interests in life. She was devoted to her favorite nephew, Boyd. Clara wondered idly why he had never asked to have her visit them before; and she found herself eager to meet the woman who commanded her man's admiring respect and affection.

"I'll be glad to have her come for as long as she wants, dear," she assured him. "It's a pity for an old person to be alone as she is. Too bad she hasn't a nice old husband to share her life."

Boyd grinned. "I'm afraid the young men of her day and acquaintance were too much in awe of her to propose. She had rather a sharp tongue, I've been told, in addition to too many brains for the proper wife. And her temper was notorious. Even now she's a terror when anything angers or upsets her. Anyway, she never married."

"Well, I'll write and ask her at once, Boyd. What is her full name and address? If you've ever called her anything but just Aunt Jane I can't remember it."

This, under the circumstances, was a disturbing question, and Boyd had dreaded it in spite of two years of peace which had done so much to erase the childish bogy of the witch's curse from Clara's mind. As he answered he was very careful to seem carelessly offhand.

"Her name," he said lightly, "is Jane Evers Bassfield. The address is—why, Clara!"

He caught her as she swayed and seemed about to faint.

But Clara's surrender to old fears was over in a few moments.

"The names are so much alike," she explained later in the evening. "Joan Basfield the witch—and Jane Bassfield, your aunt. For an instant I was rather startled. I'm sorry to be such a fool, Boyd."

"I was afraid the name would bother you," Boyd confessed, "or I would have asked her here long ago. But now that you have cleared this last hurdle I think we can safely say that you are cured of your superstition—if you don't mind my calling a spade a spade."

When Jane Bassfield arrived in answer to her invitation, Clara was further reassured. Obviously she was a strong-minded, prideful old lady with her firm, projecting chin and arrogant nose. And her eyes were that cool gray that can be glacial in moments of anger. But her manner was warm and charming in the extreme.

"I've been perishing to meet Boyd's wife for two years. But I couldn't very well come without being invited, and I was afraid you didn't want to be bothered with doddering old age. Show me the room you've picked for me, my dear, and come along and tell me how Boyd is treating you. If he's a cruel husband I'll set the spirits on him!"

Boyd hastened to answer the perturbed question that instantly rose in Clara's eyes.

"She means that she'll disturb my

morning coffee by ghostly rappings on the breakfast table," he laughed. "Aunt Jane is supposed to be psychic and everything."

"Are you—really?" asked Clara, gazing wide-eyed at the vigorous old woman, and with that in her voice that made Boyd wince in alarm.

Jane Bassfield shrugged, the gesture seeming almost masculine.

"Who can say?" she evaded. "Everyone assures me so often that psychic phenomena are all faked that I'm beginning to believe it myself. But long ago I found that I could defend myself from ignorant and undesirable people by claiming that I was psychic. It became, and still is, a favorite threat of mine to 'set the spirits on' anyone who tries to cross me. Heavens, child, don't look at me like that! I won't bite you!"

She put her hand in a kindly way over Clara's cold fingers, seeming not to notice when the younger woman quickly drew away from her. "Come and show me your new house. You must be fearfully successful, Boyd, to buy such a tidy little mansion."

Two days after Jane Bassfield arrived, Clara's maid, Agnes, left the Barringer employ. She left in a panic at 11 o'clock at night, announcing her change of heart, packing her belongings, and fleeing out the front gate all within one short half-hour.

To Clara she gave no explanation at all. To her good friend Beulah, the cook, she gave a reason of sorts, but it was so vague and unconvincing that it was worse than no reason.

"I don't see anything wrong with old Miss Bassfield," Beulah had said in answer to Agnes' statement that she was leaving because of Mr. Barringer's aunt. "She's awful strong-minded and kind of particular. But aside from that she's all right."

"Oh, Beulah, you should have seen what I saw just a few minutes ago. You'd march right down and say you were going to quit too!"

"What'd you see?"

"Well, you know I've been waiting on the old woman, kind of, since she got here. And Mrs. Barringer said it would be nice if I took her up a glass of hot milk. That was at half-past 10, just a few minutes ago. Well, I heated some milk—you saw me—and took it up to her.

"I knocked on her door and didn't get an answer, so I just went in, thinking the old lady was asleep and that I'd put the milk on the stand near the bed for her when she woke up. But she wasn't asleep.

"I slipped in quiet and she didn't hear me, I guess. She was sitting straight up in bed with a night-cap on and just that little night-light going. And then—what I saw!"

"Well, what'd you see?" asked Beulah impatiently.

"Shadows!" said Agnes with a tensity that would have been absurd had it not been for the pallor of her face.

"What about the shadows?" Beulah urged her.

"She was sitting so the night-light threw a big shadow of her against the wall. And such a shadow! The end of her nose and the end of her chin almost came together. The night-cap looked like a—a—I can't tell you just what, Beulah. All I can say is—she looked like an old witch!"

"Go on!" scoffed Beulah. "You a grown woman, saying such things!"

"But that wasn't the worst," said Agnes, unheeding the jeer. "There were other shadows sort of swimming around

hers on the wall. They looked like shadows of nightmare animals all bowing and dancing around the shadow of her head with the nose and chin almost coming together. But when I looked at her and not at her shadow I couldn't see any shapes of animals around her. It was only the shadows I could see." Agnes stopped for breath.

"Then what?" prompted Beulah.

"Isn't that enough? The old lady saw me standing there all of a sudden, and she glared like she was going to jump at me. Her eyes were all whites, and she said, 'Get out, you!' And I got out. And I'm going to keep right on getting out, Beulah. I won't live in a place with anyone like that. Honest, I think she *is* a witch!"

Which met with the scorn it deserved. Beulah was a realistic soul, and she treated Agnes' raving with amused indifference. But she was, nevertheless, unable to persuade Agnes to change her mind and stay under the Barringer roof.

It was soon after this that Clara Barringer began to be troubled with insomnia. It was not the ordinary affair of being unable to go to sleep—it was a matter of being afraid to let herself sink into slumber: her dreams were so hideous! Just what these nightmares were she couldn't have said herself. She never remembered any of them. All she knew was they were utterly horrible and left her weak and shaken in the morning.

Boyd was more familiar with her nightmares than she herself was—he heard her mumbled, feverish whispering during the night only too often. And piecing the broken snatches of her sleep talk together, and viewing with alarm the delirious pattern the words produced, he went one day to a famous mind specialist. To him he told the story of the fantastic curse that haunted his wife, and he recounted the bits of sentences and phrases that voiced her terror in the nightmare-ridden night.

At the conclusion of the account the specialist pronounced the same opinion that Boyd himself had formed: his aunt, Jane Bassfield, must leave their home at once!

"For there is no doubt, my dear man, that the presence of your aunt and the odd coincidence of names have wrought up the feelings of your wife to a dangerous pitch. Really, I couldn't answer for her sanity if the disturbing element, Miss Bassfield, is not removed at once!"

"And you think she'll be herself again as soon as my aunt leaves?" Boyd's voice was shaken. To the doctor this was a most interesting and intriguing case, but to Boyd it was the anguish of his beloved wife.

"I'm sure she'll be all right when your aunt leaves, Mr. Barringer."

Boyd hesitated an instant before putting his next question. He felt like a fool, but for the life of him he couldn't restrain it.

"Then there is no danger of—of this thing coming true? There is no chance that——?" He colored with embarrassment.

"No danger that the lady will turn your wife into a cat?" The specialist's voice was as heavy with scorn as he dared make it, what with the size of the fee he had in mind as suitable for the Barringer purse. "Hardly, my dear fellow! That is a metamorphosis rather incompatible with the best customs of biology!"

"I know it sounds ridiculous," Boyd confessed. "But if you had seen my wife's eyes last night? Her eyes were always queerly cat-like, and last night they were enormous, with glints of green and yellow——"

"Mr. Barringer, you will be my patient too if you don't watch your step. Use your reason, man! Just go out into the street here, and watch the motors and trolley cars go by, and to the accompaniment of that friendly din say to yourself a dozen times—I am afraid my aunt is going to change my wife into a cat! If that doesn't make you roar with cleansing laughter in about three seconds—you'd better come back here and take a few treatments yourself."

JANE BASSFIELD took Boyd's awkward attempts at mollifying explanation better than he had hoped she would. Indeed, she seemed almost to have suspected some such condition.

"I was afraid that Clara didn't like me," she sighed. "I have tried hard to be friends, but she seems almost to fear me. I'll go immediately, of course."

With Clara she seemed deeply sympathetic.

"I'm so sorry you haven't been feeling as well as usual. And I'm so sorry I have to leave you—some business matters at home that I must tend to at once."

But for one instant, just before train time, she and Clara were alone. And if Boyd could have heard and seen he would not have been so sure that the mere withdrawal of his aunt's presence would leave his wife as she had been before the visit.

With her eyes gleaming like cold fires, the grim old woman whispered one sentence to Clara. The words wiped the color from the younger woman's face and sent the thick blood rushing to her brain. It confirmed her every dazed suspicion; and, indicating only one possible explanation to her mind, this sentence can be pointed to as the final seal of her fate.

"Distance won't stop me, Clara *Jones*, and you know it—you who also know the history of Joan Basfield!"

Boyd was vastly disappointed that day. He had hoped to the last that he could reconcile his wife to the old lady; so it was most unfortunate that Clara had suddenly become too ill to accompany them to the train. . . .

CLARA BARRINGER'S illness, mentioned by the later newspaper accounts of her curious disappearance, persisted from this time on. In the course of the next month Boyd called often at the office of the specialist in mind disorders.

"Can it be that there is something physically wrong with her brain—tumor or bone pressure or something?" he asked the doctor once.

"Why do you ask?"

"Because she is suffering from the most frightful headaches. Her eyes have been tested and found excellent, so that this could not be the cause."

"What does Mrs. Barringer say about her headaches?" the doctor probed.

"She says they are due to—but what she says is so fanciful that it wouldn't help you any to know."

"Nevertheless, tell me what she says is the cause, please."

"Well then," answered Boyd, his eyes averted, "she says that it is due to the changing of the shape of her head. She says that her skull is gradually growing rounder and flatter—like a cat's!"

The doctor shook his head.

"I've never heard nor seen before so persistent a delusion," he mused. "But I'm afraid there is nothing we can do. Power of mind over matter, you know. She will probably continue to suffer from these headaches until we can cure her. If I could only see her!"

But this Boyd would not consent to.

"She becomes terribly angry if I even mention you," he confessed. "She simply

would not see you or admit for one instant the chance that her mind is not quite right."

However, he was soon forced to accede and obey the doctor's request that he see his patient personally.

"Clara," he asked anxiously one day, "why do you walk so queerly, with your arms hung so? You are getting very round-shouldered."

Her voice was more disturbing in the hopeless calm of its answer than any wild hysteria would have been, and her words sent him rushing once again to the specialist's office.

"You know why, Boyd," she said. Just that and nothing more; no attempt to explain or to answer his words of protest.

"You must come and see for yourself, doctor," he pleaded later. "The time has arrived when we must do something drastic. This must stop!"

"Describe to me the way she walks, please."

"It is very hard to describe. About all I can say is that she walks almost like—like an animal! Her arms hang straight down before her, and are drawn close together as though they were—were forelegs. She bends far over from the waist so that her hands are nearly on a level with her knees. And her stride itself has changed so that, while she seems to rise and fall as though on pads, she is yet more awkward."

"Quite in order with the cat delusion," pronounced the doctor. "I'll come this evening as a personal friend. Don't hint to her that I'm calling in a professional capacity."

The call was not productive. After talking with Clara Barringer and sounding her as deeply as he dared, the specialist admitted that he was rather undecided as to what to do next. And, as it is the custom to do in such cases, he advised consulting another specialist.

Writing a name and address on his card, he handed it to Boyd.

"Go and see this man," he suggested. "Your wife's case has passed beyond the confines of the mind and into the purely physical. A physician should see her at once, and this man is of the best. He is particularly well informed concerning bone ailments—and I think he will need all his knowledge to diagnose the trouble that has bent your wife's shoulders and rounded them so decidedly."

So another great specialist called at the Barringer home and examined Clara with microsocopic care. This time the identity was admitted. Boyd did not attempt to pass the doctor off as a friend. Specimen blood was taken, and the specialist left in a noncommittal fog of silence to take his problem to the laboratory and pronounce sentence accordingly.

"Poor Boyd!" said Clara softly. "It's no use, dear. You might as well save us both grief and wasted time. No doctor can help me—unless he can go back two hundred years and save old Joan Basfield from a witch's death!"

"Clara, for God's sake——" At the look in her eyes, Boyd stopped helplessly.

The findings of the second specialist threw no scientific light on the subject of the malformation of Clara's back and shoulders.

"There is absolutely nothing wrong with Mrs. Barringer that I can lay my finger on with definite knowledge," he said. "Yet there is something decidedly wrong with the set of her shoulders and the curve of her spine."

Boyd eyed the doctor intently, sensing evasion.

"You are quite sure your laboratory tests revealed no unusual circumstance?" he insisted.

The doctor stroked his bearded chin.

"There was one perplexing discovery," he said uneasily. "However, I can only think it was the fault of the microscope. I have sent the instrument out to be inspected for lens flaws, and have submitted the slide I was studying to a professional laboratory for their opinion. But of course the error must lie in my microscope. There could actually be no such blood corpuscles as the glass revealed."

"What was the matter?" Boyd's voice was strained.

"There were present, in the blood specimen I obtained, some corpuscles that were—I hardly know how to say it——"

"Not human?" Boyd suggested, biting his lips for self-control.

"Yes," said the doctor, staring, "exactly."

"Like a cat's?" Boyd's voice was unrecognizable.

"How in the world did you guess that, man?" cried the doctor.

Boyd told haltingly of the delusions from which Clara suffered.

"But she is mad!" said the doctor. "Utterly mad! She needs more than a physician, my friend. Forgive me for saying it, but she should be given the expert care of an institution for the mentally deranged."

"Your microscopic findings?" Boyd said dully. "They prove——"

"They prove no such crack-brained thing as you suggest," interrupted the doctor. "In these days of highly artificial civilization humanity is rapidly succumbing to new diseases. Assuming my microscope is correct, I have merely been fortunate enough, from my standpoint at least, to be in a position to tabulate and announce a new medical discovery: that is all."

But it was not quite all. The worthy doctor was offered another profound scientific puzzle before a week had passed.

A fine, downy growth of hair was appearing on Clara Barringer's arms and body!

With detached excitement the doctor took several specimens and hastened to his microscope, which had been returned to him marked mechanically perfect. He examined the specimen intently. Then he phoned Boyd and asked him to come to his office at once.

"It is like no hair that I have ever seen before," he concluded. "It is not like hair at all. It is like—*fur!*"

Boyd was utterly beyond words. He merely nodded, with his eyes closed and his lips compressed. Still without a word he left the doctor's office and went directly to the railroad station. . . .

BOYD's interview with his aunt, a hundred miles away, was not very satisfactory.

"Boyd, you are entirely insane! Clara's family history is correct. There was a Joan Basfield who was hanged for witchcraft in Salem in the year 1692. I will go further and admit that I am a direct descendant of that unfortunate woman—her son changed the name to Bassfield, with a double 's,' for reasons that are now unknown. But as for the preposterous bewitchment you are talking of——"

"So you are of the blood of Joan Bassfield, the witch!" Boyd flung at her. "And this is the seventh generation! The seventh generation!" Then he leaned back, ashamed of his violence.

"You poor boy!" murmured Jane Bassfield without reproach. "Go back to Clara. She needs you. And give her my sincerest love and sympathy."

On the train that bore him back, Boyd

tried not to think of the shadow of a cold, unearthly smile that had seemed to tighten the corners of the old woman's lips. He had, of course, imagined this. He was imagining many things of late. . . .

At the door of his home he hesitated before admitting himself. He was imagining things again. It seemed to him as though a palpable aura of loathsome shadows hung over that house of his. But he was not left to stand long. Mary —the maid who had replaced Agnes— flung open the door and beckoned him in before he could insert his key in the lock. She had, it appeared, waited there for him, and her relief at his return was almost hysterical.

"Oh, Mr. Barringer, Mr. Barringer, something's the matter with your missus! Something's the matter—something——"

Boyd shook the girl roughly as her voice rose from key to key in overstrung distress. His hands, clutching at her arms more savagely than he knew, jerked her back to some control of herself.

"What is wrong?" he urged. "Tell me!"

"I don't know what it is. Something. She's in her room and won't let anyone come in. She's locked the door!"

"Why did she lock herself in?" Boyd was white-faced with a foreboding he would not admit even to himself. "Was she ill?"

"No, not exactly. I can't say she was sick, hardly. Worse than that!" Mary wept noisily, fearfully.

"What was the matter, then? Tell me how she looked!"

"She looked awful, Mr. Barringer. I can hardly tell you. But less than an hour after you left she began to *change*. The hair on her arms and body that you went to see the doctor about got longer and thicker like it was growing under your very eyes. And she got — smaller!"

"Smaller? What are you talking about, Mary!"

"That's just what!" repeated Mary, her voice rising shrilly again. "She sort of shriveled up. She sat down in the big chair in the library, and she fell asleep. I looked in at her when she was just dozing off, and again when she just woke up. And I saw all the change in her. And I say she was littler! She was a foot shorter when she got up than when she had sat down!"

"Mary—think what you're saying!" Boyd shook her again. "You don't mean to say such a thing. You were mistaken!"

"No I wasn't, either. She was really smaller. Her clothes hung loose all over her. And she was stooped more than I ever saw her before!"

"Then what?" prompted Boyd, licking his dry lips.

"Then's when she went to her room. All of a sudden she woke up. I was watching her. And she gave one look at herself in the big mirror in the hall. She screamed out like someone had stabbed her. And before I could say a word she turned and scuttled up the stairs. She didn't run, Mr. Barringer— she *scuttled!* As she went her hands hung so low that they touched the stairs, and she seemed to help herself along with them, too, like an animal! And her eyes——"

Boyd waited to hear no more. Releasing the girl from his clutch so suddenly that she nearly fell, he turned and raced up the stairway to Clara's room. He did not stop to turn on the lights but ran down the dark hall with the certainty of long familiarity.

"Clara," he called, tapping on the panels of her door. No light showed from the slit under the door. Her room was in pitch darkness; and there was no answer to his call.

"Clara—it's Boyd. Open the door." Still there was no answer, no sound from the darkened room. He twisted at the knob, but the door was locked.

"Clara, can you hear me?" He pounded on the panels till the skin was knocked from his knuckles, though he did not feel the pain.

"I will have to break the door down," he said, speaking aloud and entirely unaware that he had so spoken.

There was a stir in the darkened room, a voice that he could hardly recognize as Clara's.

"Go away! Oh, please go away!"

"I must get in, Clara."

"No! No! Go away!" The voice was high and keen, almost metallic. It sounded more like a violin string that had been plucked too harshly than like a human voice.

"But, darling," soothed Boyd, "don't you see—if you're not well I'll have to call the doctor. You can't stay on in there by yourself. You must have some kind of attention."

"Boyd, no!"

"Won't you let me send Mary in to you if you don't want me?"

"No!"

"Clara, dear—please."

"No, Boyd, no! Oh, go away!"

Boyd called upon his will for a last effort.

"I'll break in if you don't unlock the door!"

"Boyd, you mustn't——"

With his shoulder aching and tingling from the shock, Boyd stepped through the splintered doorway and into the darkness of the room. The shades were tightly drawn, and this in addition to the natural gloom of a moonless night made the room like a pocket. He tried to penetrate the blackness with his eyes but could see nothing.

His hand groped along the wall for the light switch. The movement was arrested by the voice—the voice that was like and yet not like Clara's. At the sound of that voice his searching fingers seemed to coil in on themselves as though they had touched ice.

"Don't light the light! Oh, don't light the light! Whatever you do you mustn't touch the light!"

Boyd held his breath till his chest ached. The voice had come from low down—from almost the level of the floor!

What sight would meet his eyes if he flooded that room with light? What machination of Joan Basfield, dead two hundred and thirty years, would reveal itself? Better never to enter this room again, better never to look on his wife's face again, than stun his brain with the spectacle that intuition told him would confront his eyes!

But this was nonsense! Such things could not be! He would light the light so that he could go to Clara and soothe her out of her fears. Then—after she was well again—they would smile together at their fantastic terrors. His fingers sought along the wall for the switch.

"Don't! Don't!" the voice pleaded.

Out of the whirlpool of his mind Boyd clutched at one perplexing straw. It was a small thing, it seemed, to take up his thoughts at such a moment, but the wonder of it grew and grew.

"How—how do you know what I am doing?" he whispered at last. "It is too dark for you to see me. I can't see you."

"I see every move you make," said the voice. "I can see as well in this room as you can in daylight."

"But how? It is pitch-dark in here! How can you see?"

"Oh, Boyd," moaned the voice, "you

know why I can see in the dark as well as in the light! You know!"

"I won't believe it," said Boyd hoarsely. "I tell you I won't believe it! I won't! I won't!"

Again his questing fingers fumbled for the light switch. "I'm going to turn on this light!"

"You mustn't, I say! You *must not*——"

There was a click and the room was flooded with light.

For a dozen eternities Boyd stood there in the doorway, staring with frightful eyes at a small, furry body that shuddered and huddled in the corner.

There was a soft patter of frantic paws. The supple, feline body flashed by him and out of the door with a scream that was almost human.

The Jolly Hangman

By EDGAR DANIEL KRAMER

I am the jolly hangman,
  Alone in my little house
With the lamp and the shifting shadows
  And the feet of a furtive mouse;
Though folks are turning from me
  With eyes that are wide with dread,
I laugh, as I sip my toddy
  And swallow my hard-earned bread.

I am forever singing
  A bit of a haunting tune
That I caught from the lips of a dreamer,
  As he dropped through the afternoon;
And this is what I am humming
  Over and over again:
"Men are but ghosts of shadows,
  And shadows but ghosts of men!"

I am the jolly hangman,
  Singing the long night through,
Hearing the breeze in the lilacs,
  Seeing the moon in the dew,
Laughing at folks who shun me,
  Scorning to seek my bed,
As I drink till the dawn and wonder
  If dead men are truly dead.

THE absence of illustrations (except for the portraits of Doctor de Grandin and Doctor Trowbridge) in last month's WEIRD TALES was not intentional. The stories had been in the artist's hands for more than a month, but through an unforeseen circumstance they failed to reach us in time to be used. So we had to put the magazine on the press without illustrations for the stories. There will be illustrations in all future issues.

Just Too Too Too

Caroline Ferber writes from Chicago: "What a dashingly handsome Elak we have on the front cover for July! Henry Kuttner is outdoing himself with the adventuring Atlantean. This young writer is really climbing into a name. May his success continue—ever upward. *Fortune's Fools* left me rather blank. The story can't quite remain in my mind—it's not as outstanding as some of Quinn's others. However, the charming panther damsel was altogether surprizing. Somehow I wonder if possibly our hero, Messire de Grandin, could not have made friends with the panther. After all—strange pets make life so much more interesting. Still, there is such an air of finality about the whole plot. Tense? Nothing less! Doctor Keller's *Dust in the House* wasn't too thrilling. Suspense was heavy enough to keep one reading, but I couldn't feel satisfied with the tale. *The Defense Rests* has somewhat of the ghost element in it, but so astoundingly! I muse upon the possibilities of the terror of a mind shackled by death. Woo—woo! I'm all up in the air yet more after the present installment of *The Black Drama.* Nice ole Judgy is about the only stable character, one whom one can lean upon for a breathing-spell—he seems to ooze with a quiet, yet very powerful, courage. Pleasant li'l Jakey has just enuf comedy in him for relief from this queer fellow, Varduk. I'm still wondering if he's eccentric, insane, or a real hones'-to-badness walking dead man. Well now, this modern Icarus, David Rand, was quite a character, with his bewful bronze wings. What an idea! It's too — too — too —. Maybe you think I wasn't up in the air with him, swooping, soaring—the wind in my hair and rushing past my ears. Thanx to Edmond Hamilton for a very unusual story. Oboy!—CASmith went to town with overwhelming hordes of toads and more toads—ugly critters they is. Poor fellow, Pierre, to have come to so messy an end. H'ray—Paul Ernst pleased me this time with his *Escape.* The opening paragraph describes my thoughts of this queer bird—"he had the craziest form of craziness I've ever seen." Holy smokers!—Robert Bloch must have had a nitemarish inspiration to write *Return to the Sabbath.* It's just about the most gruesomely described I've read in ages—Karl Jorla's eyes looked at me through the whole tale. Looks as though this Bloch boy is climbing and climbing—more horribly each time. Your reprint of *Saladin's Throne-Rug* proved absorbing. Any more of these rug tales and I'll wish to start collecting these masterpieces of Oriental art. I read with particular interest the inscription woven into the rug. This Oriental self-abasement gets me. Also the jar of scent—all the pleasing odors accumulated—what wonder that the combination should be dizzying? O. K.—here's my say on reprints—by all means, include those from early issues of WT as well as not-so-well-known selections from classic writers of the past. Translations are also acceptable, if they're not too dull, as some have been. Just had a brilliant flash! Why not include, at various intervals, legends from the past—from all

nations—weird & spooky ones, of course? . . . *The Fire Princess* looks like something I'm going to enjoy immensely—yahsuh!"

Quinn the Master

John R. Brooks writes from Montreal, Canada: "I have long been a reader and admirer of your excellent publication. I enjoy especially such writers as Robert E. Howard, H. P. Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith and Seabury Quinn. I agree with writers who mourn the loss of H. P. Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard, but think that Seabury Quinn is as finished a master as any of them. Whether he writes about the beloved Jules de Grandin, or just anybody or anything, his stories are always excellent reading. I wonder if you could convey to him my sincere thanks for *Roads?* Absolutely one of the finest Xmas stories I have ever read. Seabury Quinn must have had an excellent education to write such stories as that, and also *The Temple Dancer,* which appeared in your April issue. May he long be spared to write for us!"

Through the Cortex

Seymour Kapetansky writes from Detroit, Michigan: "I'm in favor of cutting out all blurbs and introductions to stories in WT. Fear is of the unknown; why let any foreknowledge seep out? Let the stories scare for their own sake. Anyway, a blurb too often gives a *right* impression of a story in WT. And that spoils all the *effect,* which is, as Poe said, the backbone of the tale. I don't want my shivers dissipated at the retina—I want them to sneak through my cortex and slither down my spine. And I *do* mean *boo!*"

From 'Way Down Under

Gordon Dryland writes from Auckland, New Zealand: "The February issue of WT, which I have just finished reading, was very nice except for *Frozen Beauty.* I thought it was rather stupid, for, after all, we want some possibility about the story. I think the best yarn was David Bernard's *The Piper from Bhutan.* Four years ago I read my first WT, which was the May 1934 issue. I have read them ever since that lucky day I was attracted by the extremely weird picture of a man and woman crouching in terror from a bat-thing. Although I did not enjoy that story, I made sure of getting my June issue. I have read some arguments concerning Gertrude Hemken's quaint letters. All I can say is, continue the good work, Gertrude. Boy! M. Brundage sure can draw. I like her drawings."

A de Grandin Movie

Bernard Austin Dwyer writes from West Shokan, New York: "I always enjoy Quinn, and of course like his Jules de Grandin tales; have often wondered why a de Grandin movie cannot be produced, with Adolphe Menjou (blonded, of course) in the title role. Vic MacLaglen would do for Costello, while Lewis Stone, if a little younger, would be admirable as Friend Trowbridge. Of course, the best thing by Quinn that I have yet seen is *Roads.* One thing I wish you'd do: commission Quinn to write an equally long story of 'the iron and heroic North,' as I naïvely enough expressed it in my letter to the Eyrie. The essence of those last few paragraphs of his; of Robert E. Howard's description of the Aryan's subconscious memories of Nordheim; Valhalla; meadhorns and ale-halls; feasting and roaring warriors; the rude comfort and majesty of the North, its wild spirit, its indomitable rudeness: the song of the Valkyrie; the last great battle in the west, and the gathering home to Wotan. All the mighty roaring wassail and weird battle glory of the wild yellow-haired clans. Quinn could do it perfectly. So could Howard, if he were alive; Howard now feasts in Valhalla (but perhaps the black Irishman wouldn't thank me for sending him off with a bunch of Squareheads); why not let Quinn? I have left the best till last. In the present issue, I consider *Slave of the Flames,* by Robert Bloch (apart from the Lovecraft story), the finest and most powerful thing in the magazine, and beyond comparison Bloch's best. Living and wonderful description; the character of Nero perfectly summed as we know it, and all seen through the glow of a fearful, fiery dream. I tell you, I don't know when I have seen words used more effectively. I honestly believe this is one of the best stories you have ever published. Nothing by Howard ever had more living force. The descriptions of the blazing buildings and of the reactions of the gloating idiot are absolute masterpieces of word imagery. Then the cleverness of combining those elements; the modern degenerate; the ancient lyre, with its

implications of Nero, who sang poetically while Rome burned—these surpass my present mastery of adjectives. Cheers for Mr. Bloch, on producing such a work! Finlay's illustration of the same is marvelous."

Wasted Space

T. Gelbert writes from Niagara Falls, New York: "In regard to the reprint question, I wish to inform you that I am one of the many readers whose copies of WEIRD TALES form an extensive collection. Many of the old numbers are a part of this ever-increasing collection. Such being the case, the reprints from former copies, which appear from time to time, are merely duplicates of what I already have. Hence the space taken up by a reprint is, to me, wasted space. Now to the last two issues: *The Doom that Came to Sarnath*, in the June number, was excellent, *The Black Drama* good. The July copy excels with *Escape*. So far as I know, the plot is original and the tale, though brief, was well told. *The Black Drama* and *Return to the Sabbath* also merit praise. There seems to be a dearth of Northwest Smith stories in WEIRD TALES of late, and perhaps C. L. Moore could be persuaded to continue the further adventures of that inimitable pair, Smith and Yarol. In my humble opinion, Jirel of Joiry should never appear in any Northwest Smith tale. Jirel and Smith are too far apart in time. However, WEIRD TALES continues to please."

Vampire Highways

Bert Reagan writes from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: "I would like to see more vampire stories in WT. The author could give a wide range of action to the story by working from a road map, having the vampire use the roads. The reader could follow the action and enjoy the events that could be emphasized. A good story could be written covering Pennsylvania, Ohio, and New York. More ghost stories could be included. The Haunted House is still mysterious."

Q. E. D.

Louise Leftwich writes from Inglewood, California: "Concerning reprints, I prefer the ones from WEIRD TALES to the older classics because I have already read nearly all of these, since I have hunted out this type of story ever since I realized there was such a *genre*. I imagine a good many of your addicts would agree with me in this, because if they didn't like that sort of story, and weren't used to reading them, they wouldn't buy WT. Q. E. D. . . . *He that Hath Wings*—there's a story, as far as I am concerned, that was worth the price of the magazine and then some. It is well written, well balanced, and finished beautifully. In other words, I liked it. It was this story and *Return to the Sabbath* that made me write this letter."

Differentness

Arthur L. Widner, Jr., writes from Bryantville, Massachusetts: "The fine issue you put out this month caused me to regret my somewhat harsh epistle of last month. Every story was good, and a few were very good, but—while being excellent stories, there was nothing particularly *weird* about them; especially so of *He that Hath Wings*, although I cast my vote for it as the No. 1 tale for July. . . . *Escape* gets the pink ribbon for its 'differentness' and *Saladin's Throne-Rug* cops the yellow piece of silk, for a real well-planned and well-written narrative, much better than that other rug story of his you reprinted a while ago."

A Fine Issue

John V. Baltadonis writes from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: "Congratulations on your fine July issue of WT! Best story in the issue was Long's *The Defense Rests*. Long doesn't appear too often in your pages, but, when he does, the stories are mostly always 'pips.' Glad to see Gerty still writing. Hank Kuttner's Elak tale this month was mighty good. *Spawn of Dagon* is a swell weird-adventure yarn. More from Hank, please. Quinn, Keller and Hamilton spin good yarns this issue. Why confine weird reprints to WT? If you did, many of Hawthorne's gems would probably be unread by many readers—I, for one. *Feathertop* was a beautiful weird tale. Incidentally, *Roads* was one humdinger of a yarn! More like that, Quinn, puh-lease. Personally, I think that story rates as excellent literature!"

Dynamic Jules

James H. Nelson, Jr., writes from Shreveport, Louisiana: "Have been reading your wonderful magazine for the past ten years, and have thoroughly enjoyed each and every

(Please turn to page 382)

COMING NEXT MONTH

A WOMAN came into Elak's range of vision, slim and dark and vital as a black flame. Red as her lips was the gown she wore, and her eyes and long tresses were midnight black. With slow footsteps she came to stand beside Elak, and in her hand, he saw, she bore a strangely filigreed chalice. Thin steam ascended from it.

She bent over Elak. The gray mists swirled back, blinding, confusing. Out of the fog loomed the woman's face, arrogantly handsome; her pale hand, and the goblet it bore. She lifted it to Elak's mouth. A cloying fragrance crept into his nostrils, and involuntary repugnance shuddered through him. The liquor's aroma was subtly sweet. A drop of the fluid touched his lips, and a hot pang raced through every atom of his body.

"Tyrala!"

On the word the woman drew back, hell-flame flaring in her eyes. She whirled to face a figure who came slowly through the mists.

It was a man, small but delicately proportioned, clad in tight-fitting silver garments, and, seeing him, Elak was reminded of the Northmen's god Baldur. The fineness of his beardless face was at variance with a certain assured strength in the dark, lazily amused eyes.

He said again, "Tyrala, your haste is ill-advised. I had not known of this man's arrival."

The woman stood rigid, clutching the chalice with white fingers. She hesitated, then asked, "Since when have you stooped to interesting yourself in my slaves, Ithron?"

The man's smile was malicious. "But is he one of yours? The men of Nyrvana are pale and yellow-haired, even as myself. This one is dark and lean as a wolf. Moreover, he wears a certain sign. . . ."

Tyrala glanced at the bracelet on Elak's wrist. For a moment fear shone in her eyes, but she said nothing. . . .

You will not want to miss this swift-moving tale of Elak of Atlantis and an evil priest of Baal-Yagoth who was more than human and who worshipped a foul god. It will be published complete in the October WEIRD TALES:

BEYOND THE PHOENIX

By Henry Kuttner

—Also—

BLACK MOON

By SEABURY QUINN

A goose-flesh story of African voodoo transplanted in the United States—an eery tale of weird rites and mysterious murders and a brilliant exploit of Jules de Grandin, ghost-breaker and occult detective.

JEKAL'S LESSON

By DAVID BERNARD

A weird, creepy story about the living corpse that lay in its coffin, there on the floor of a deserted basement, and the ghastly experience of a physician—a tale of stark horror.

THE ISLE OF ABOMINATIONS

By KADRA MAYSI

A gripping story about the strange, carnivorous forest planted by old Mr. Chalcedyne on an island in the swamps, and the shocking aftermath of an attempt to cut the forest down.

THE MAZE OF MAAL DWEB

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

What strange and bizarre fate awaited the girl Athlé and the hunter Tiglari in the fearsome labyrinth of the enchanter?

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THE EYRIE

(Continued from page 380)

issue. My only regret is that WT cannot become a weekly. Seabury Quinn and his dynamic little Jules de Grandin has always been a favorite. Although I would not class it as truly a weird story, Quinn's *Roads* was to me the most beautiful story I've seen in quite a while. I have hopes of seeing a feature story by Clark Ashton Smith in the near future. He certainly pens some thrillers. I don't approve of the classical reprints—you may find them on the shelves of almost any public library. In WT we look for something obtainable only in WT. Why not reprint *The Eighth Green Man, The Cult of the Skull,* or Merritt's *Woman of the Wood* for a second time? And please!!! — only Virgil Finlay cover designs from now on."

Nothing on Brundage

L. Everett Wade writes from Saybrook Point, Connecticut: "I'm a person of very few words, but I want to say that I have read WT for fifteen years. Every month I read the Eyrie. I have often thought of writing, but somehow never got to it. After reading all the likes and dislikes, I'm now going to recite my verse. 1st, while Finlay is an excellent artist, I'll never go back on an old friend. I want to say that he has nothing on Brundage. Of all the stories I have read and *forgotten,* it will be some time before I'll forget *Pigeons from Hell.* It was excellent. Seabury Quinn is O. K. *at times.* I miss very much the Conan stories. They were *always* O. K. . . . What has become of Northwest Smith? Of all characters he was in the front rank."

Eery Pictures

E. B. Hardy writes from Lewiston, Maine: "Congratulations. Your July cover is a dandy, and in my opinion is the only really and truly weird one WEIRD TALES has ever had. Anyway, your little boy Virgil certainly has made a creepy one for us this time. The stories in this issue are all so good it is hard to make a first choice, but I'd say *Return to the Sabbath* by Robert Bloch is my choice. I believe Mr. Bloch's stories have as eery a touch as Mr. Finlay's pictures, and that is saying a lot. About the reprints, why not let us have *all* of Robert Howard's first stories, one each month, of course? As for the nudes on the covers—please don't have 'em."

Classic Reprints

Richard H. Jamison writes from Valley Park, Missouri: "Regarding reprints: by all means do not discontinue giving us the old classics, for they *are* classics, and as such they are worth rereading. You might also reprint some of the more modern weird fiction if it is available. For instance, two of Abraham Merritt's shorter stories—*Through the Dragon Glass* and *Three Lines of Old French*—would be welcome additions to the reprint department. Then there's that Lovecraft masterpiece, *The Colour out of Space,* which many regard as his greatest story. Reprinting serials would be impractical, I'm afraid, but I'd like to see *The Moon Pool* appear there just the same. F. B. Long, Jr.'s tribute to H. P. L. in the June issue is the best to date, I think. Speaking of Long brings back fond memories of *The Space-Eaters, A Visitor from Egypt,* etc. Why not come again, Mr. Long? *Dust in the House* —I have yet to hear people talk in the stilted phrases Keller's characters used in this. *He that Hath Wings* was much better—Hamilton can always be relied upon for something new."

Mongol Hordes

R. Frederick writes from Greenville, South Carolina: "Just a few comments on WT. I have been a fairly regular reader of it for several years, and never fail to read all stories in every issue I procure. But, of course, I have my favorite stories and authors. Among the latter: Edmond Hamilton —I've never yet read a really bad story by this author. Clark Ashton Smith is another who never fails to click with me. Henry Kuttner is sometimes fine; but I was disappointed with the ending of his *Spawn of Dagon* in the July issue. I don't care much for stories of Atlantis, either. My favorites are interplanetary and weird future-science stories. Jack Williamson has his very own touch of genius, with a remarkable imagina-

tive capacity. David H. Keller has always been one of my favorites. . . . I don't like serials at all. Hence, much of the savor was taken out of *The Black Drama*, by Gans T. Field. Seabury Quinn knows how to write, and usually I like his products. I also join 'G. H.,' of Chicago, in deploring the almost inevitable conquering of America by Mongol hordes—as most writers of futuristic fiction seem to foresee it. In what possible respect are the Mongols equal to, or even superior to, us, as intimated by these writers of such irrational and illogical stories? I for one deplore any such unfounded prediction, and its ultimate psychological effects cannot be else than pernicious and detrimental."

A Few Brickbats

W. S. Hamilton writes from Sydney, Australia: "This is the first time I have ever taken the opportunity to congratulate you for the endless enjoyment that your wonderful magazine has offered me. I have always been an avid reader of science and weird literature, but WT is by far the most enthralling magazine on the market. I haven't many brickbats to throw, only a few, so here goes: 1. Not so many tales based on the rather threadbare theme of Bram Stoker's *Dracula;* they get rather monotonous after you have read one or two, and besides that, most of the 'horror' magazines are noted for it, so don't let us sink to that level, please. 2. This is in the nature of a plea rather than a brickbat. Could you possibly ask Virgil Finlay to keep his nudes *inside* the cover, as at present there is a 'purity campaign' in Australia and most of the magazines that show the unveiled beauty of a woman's form are going to be banned; so please don't, whatever you do, do anything to stop WT from entering our puritan country, or else! Now for some requests. Give us more of Seabury Quinn's wonderful stories. I think that *Roads* was one of the most beautiful stories I have ever read. *Toean Matjan* was very well written, but there again, the old theme crops up; if it's not a werewolf it's a weretiger or some other animal."

Most Colossal

William F. Zuckert, Jr., writes from Washington, D. C.: "Just a few lines to register my vote in favor of the grandest, the most colossal, the best, the most—well,

NEXT MONTH

BLACK MOON

By SEABURY QUINN

A GOOSE-FLESH story of Haitian voodoo transplanted in a peaceful New Jersey countryside—an eery tale of weird rites and mysterious murders and stark horror—a brilliant exploit of Jules de Grandin.

THOSE of you who have not yet made the acquaintance of Jules de Grandin, occult detective and ghost-breaker, have a real treat in store. For de Grandin is the most fascinating detective in literature. This mercurial little French scientist is a man of wide experience and great erudition, master of occult phenomena, as vain as he is brave. This novelette will be printed complete

in the

OCTOBER

issue of

WEIRD TALES

on sale September 1

anyhow, I like it! I mean the tale in the July issue concerning Ramon Nazara y de Grandin—the paternal ancestor of our beloved Jules. How about it, Mr. Quinn, may we expect to hear something of the further adventures of Ramon, in the very near future? Here is one WT fanatic who hopes that we do! As usual the July issue was swell! I liked the way *The Black Drama* is progressing. Incidentally, this is one of the few serials which I may honestly say I've enjoyed as much as my favorites, the novelette and the short story. Hamilton's *He that Hath Wings* was really gripping; I know this story will remain in my mind for a long time. . . . I shall have to allow one big hurrah to take care of the rest of the stories. I'd like nothing better than to comment on each and every one, but I'm confident that my fellow fans will take care of that."

A Million Minds

Ernest H. Ormsbee writes from Rensselaer, New York: "Three or four years ago I made the suggestion that you expand a bit and publish all your serials complete in a thick quarterly (same size as WEIRD TALES) and put it on the market at about fifry cents per copy. I never heard anything about the idea, but I still think it good and I am pretty confident every WEIRD TALES fan would buy the quarterly as readily as they do the mother paper. I have explained to you several times in the past fifteen years that I considered it a good policy to let the editor shape his own magazine because any mere reader is unable to do it. I think it was your predecessor, Edwin Baird, who once told me that a million men had a million minds and obviously a million minds working on the same magazine would only succeed in making a botch of it. I realize the editor who can strike a composite of a million readers is exceptionally fortunate, and you have done a wonderful job so far. Occasionally, of course, I run across a story that doesn't register too deeply, but I am not going to criticize because I'm darn sure I never could better your effort or your percentages. . . . Referring to your question about the publishing of reprints: I have covered, fairly well I hope, the range of the classic weirds, and I am not looking for a palm when I assure you I think our WEIRD TALES has gone so far ahead of the entire world of weird fiction that to publish tales of the past will not be adding much to the prestige of our magazine. Your own writers are up-to-the-moment, Twentieth Century writers who tell their stories in our own language. There is nothing *fin de siecle* about them. Consequently your tales are better. This, of course, is not derogating in any way some outstanding works like Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Since Poe we have had very few really weird tales that you haven't already garnered. With all due respect to the artistry of Poe, I am not one of those fans who think him supreme in the weird field. You have, somewhere, my definition of the weird: to save you the trouble of looking it up I will repeat it: *A weird tale is one that has no answer in the world of reality*. Poe too often took the *weird* out of his weird tales by prosaically giving them a commonplace matter-of-fact explanation that any school kid could understand."

Concise Comments

Leah Bodine Drake writes from Shreveport, Louisiana: "*Fortune's Fools* is grand! — truly exciting and poetic. Each installment of *The Black Drama* gets better. *Mother of Toads* reminded me of Dunsany. Your contents get better every month."

Conrad H. Ruppert writes from Jamaica, New York: "Like the majority of readers of WEIRD TALES, I was impressed by Seabury Quinn's *Roads* in the January issue. In fact, I thought *Roads* was the greatest Christmas story I have ever read."

Robert McCary writes from Brent, Alabama: "Seymour Kapetansky thinks Hawthorne isn't good enough to suit him. He doesn't have to read it if he doesn't like it."

James J. O'Donnell writes from Detroit, Michigan: "I greatly enjoy the really fine short stories that you print in the back part of the magazine each month. Do you realize (but of course you do) that some of your shortest stories in WEIRD TALES are immortal literature? I need mention only two of these to prove my contention: *The Stranger from Kurdistan* by E. Hoffmann Price, and *The Outsider* by the late H. P. Lovecraft."

Most Popular Story

Readers, what is your favorite story in this issue? Your prime favorite in the July issue, as shown by your votes and letters, was Edmond Hamilton's fantastic yarn about a modern Icarus, *He that Hath Wings*.

W. T.—8

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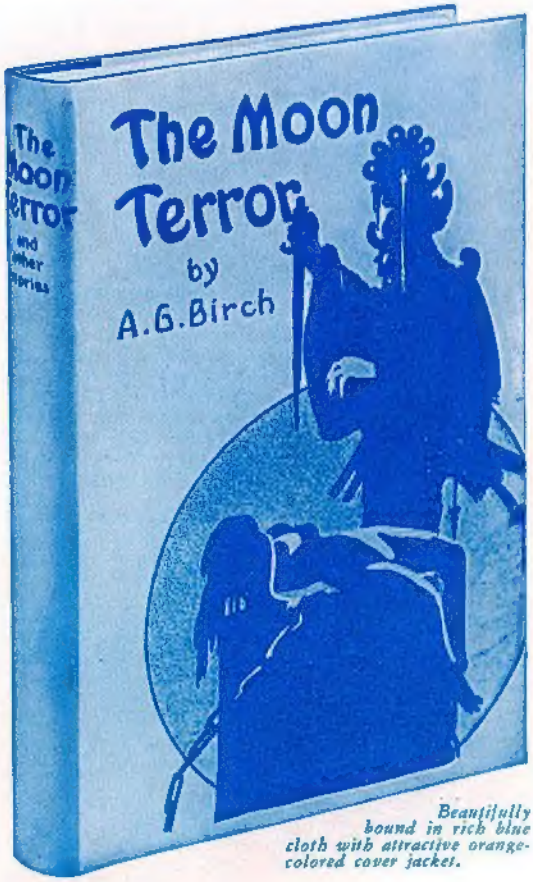

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